

**Family Support for the Elderly in Rural China:
An Illustration from Shaanxi**

by

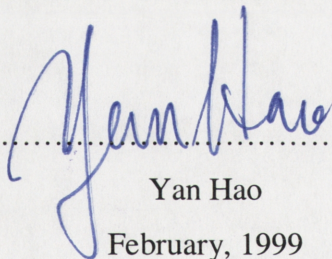
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DECLARATION

Except where otherwise acknowledged in the text, this
thesis represents my own work.



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ABSTRACT

Much of the recent interest in the consequences of population ageing focuses on the security and support for the elderly. In China, the family remains the principal provider of old-age support and care. This study aims at examining on a community basis the status and well-being of the elderly, the familial support system for the elderly, and the old-age security strategies of rural people in response to the two major government policies in rural areas: birth control and family support for the elderly, in the context of a functional return to family farming. In order to attain the proposed objects within limited time and financial budget, this study employed the micro-demographic community-study approach that combines a formal, structured survey operation with a number of intensive quantitative techniques.

This study was conducted in a rural community in central Shaanxi, China. Like other places in China, the study area has witnessed tremendous changes over the last few decades. However, unlike most other developing countries on a similar modernisation course, these changes are initiated primarily by the government's direct intervention based on ideological concepts or macro socio-economic rationales. The present elderly generation is therefore a unique group in the population because of the dramatic experience in their life.

It is evident that the living standard of the elderly in the study area has greatly improved since the reform. However, this does not necessarily mean that old people enjoyed the same level of well-being and quality of life as younger generations. On the other hand, modernisation and the government's campaigns against 'feudalist and superstitious' practices have greatly eroded the power and influence of old people at home and in the community. In the study area, only a small number of old people still played an active role in the family.

In the study area, despite rapid and substantial socio-economic changes, the family system of support appears still to be largely intact. This is evidenced by both the high levels of coresidence and the common receipt of material support from non-resident children. Still, a sizeable proportion of old persons relied on their own resources, or were partly assisted by children, for living expenses. The level of support the elderly received was not very high, and it was not necessarily closely related to the number and sex of children they have or children's financial capacity. Rather, it was influenced primarily by the willingness of children to provide support.

Under the joint influence of modernisation and programmatic efforts, the small-family norm has been widely accepted in the study area. However, coresidence in a multi-generation household is still considered ideal. The most common reason is inter-generational support and care, followed by family traditions. The inconsistency between the ideal number of persons and the ideal number of generations in a family household surprisingly mirrors the inconsistency of government policies between birth control and family support.

The present working-age adults have fewer children but more opportunities to obtain their own old-age security in a market-oriented economy. For economic support, the majority followed the traditional pattern and expected children to be their main providers in old age. Nevertheless, such expectations did not lead to a noticeable preference for large families. Most couples believed that two children are enough, providing that one is a son. As a trade-off for quantity, parents now put special emphasis on the education of children. Still, a sizeable proportion of people wanted an increasing contribution from the community, or believed that they could arrange their old-age security with own efforts. Very few people participated in the insurance programs designed by the government to serve rural residents. It takes time for such programs to be trusted by their target clients.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
DECLARATION	i
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT	ii
ABSTRACT	iii
TABLE OF CONTENTS	v
LIST OF TABLES	viii
LIST OF FIGURES	x
LIST OF MAPS	xi

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

1.1.	The research issue in context	1
1.2.	A brief review of literature on family support for the elderly	4
1.2.1.	The central role of the family in old-age support	4
1.2.2.	Factors influencing the family support	5
1.2.3.	Family support as intergenerational transfers	8
1.2.4.	Family support and state support, or integration of the two	10
1.3.	Changing age structure of the Chinese population, 1953-2050	13
1.4.	The family and old-age support in China	19
1.4.1.	Changing structure of Chinese families	19
1.4.2.	Old-age support as a component of the social security system in China	22
1.4.3.	Recent research on old-age support in rural China	26
1.5.	Rationale and conceptual framework	27
1.6.	Organisation of the thesis	33

CHAPTER 2. METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES OF THE STUDY

2.1.	Research methods and research design: an integrated approach	35
2.2.	Source of data	37
2.2.1.	Household survey	37
2.2.2.	Direct observation and in-depth interview	43
2.2.3.	Focus group discussion	49
2.2.4.	Secondary data	52
2.3.	Summary remarks	52

CHAPTER 3. THE STUDY SITES: PINGLING AND NANSHANGZHAO

3.1.	Selection of the study site	54
3.2.	Regional setting of the study site	60
3.3.	Institutional changes in the study site	66
3.4.	Economic changes in the study area	72

3.4.1.	An increasingly diversified rural economy	73
3.4.2.	Agricultural production: toward mechanisation and commodity production	75
3.4.3.	Non-agricultural sectors: in search of new opportunities	81
3.5.	Family planning in the study site	85
3.6.	Summary remarks	92

CHAPTER 4. ECONOMIC WELL-BEING AND SOCIAL STATUS OF THE ELDERLY

4.1.	Socio-economic development and the status of the elderly	94
4.2.	The elderly in the study area: a profile	99
4.2.1.	The elderly as seen from survey data	99
4.2.2.	The present-day elderly: a unique generation	102
4.3.	Economic well-being of the elderly	107
4.3.1.	Improved living standard of villagers as a whole	107
4.3.2.	Economic well-being of the elderly in relation to younger generations	111
4.4.	Social status of the elderly	116
4.4.1.	Household headship among the elderly and their influence in decision-making	117
4.4.2.	Influence of the elderly in children's marriage arrangements	121
4.5.	Summary remarks	128

CHAPTER 5. FAMILY SUPPORT FOR THE ELDERLY

5.1.	Defining family support	131
5.2.	Living arrangements of the elderly	132
5.3.	The availability of family members	138
5.3.1.	The availability of a spouse	139
5.3.2.	The availability of children	141
5.4.	Economic support received by the elderly	145
5.4.1.	Forms of economic support	145
5.4.2.	The level of economic support	148
5.5.	Old people in different situations: case studies in Nanshangzhao	152
5.5.1.	Childless elderly	153
5.5.2.	The elderly with no sons	155
5.5.3.	The elderly living separately from children	157
5.5.4.	The elderly in coresidence	159
5.5.5.	The elderly in destitute conditions	160
5.6.	The willingness of support	162
5.7.	Promoting family support at both the national and local levels	167
5.8.	Summary remarks	172

CHAPTER 6. OLD-AGE SECURITY AND FAMILY PLANNING:	
ATTITUDE AND STRATEGY	
6.1. The old-age security-fertility hypothesis	174
6.2. Living arrangement expectations: ideal family size and structure	181
6.3. Expectations of coresidence	190
6.4. Old-age support strategies: whom to rely on?	197
6.4.1. Family support and the children	199
6.4.2. Community assistance and self-support	203
6.5. Summary remarks	207
CHAPTER 7. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS	
7.1. . Summary of major findings	210
7.2. Conclusions and discussions	214
7.2.1. Demographic factors	215
7.2.2. Traditions and social norms	217
7.2.3. The socio-economic development	219
7.2.4. Government strategies and policies	221
7.3. Implications for future research	224
APPENDIX 1. Household survey questionnaire	226
APPENDIX 2. Guideline for focus group discussions	227
APPENDIX 3. The Old-Age Support Contract	229
REFERENCES	231

LIST OF TABLES

	Page
Table 1.1. Changes in population age structure, China, 1953-2050	14
Table 1.2. Distribution of the elderly population aged 60 and over, by pension coverage, sex and residence, China, 1992	24
Table 2.1. Distribution of sample population, by selected characteristics, Pingling Township, mid-1996	42
Table 3.1. Selected indicators of population and family planning, China and Shaanxi, 1995	56
Table 3.2. Selected socio-economic indicators, Pingling Township and Nanshangzhao Village, mid-1996	64
Table 3.3. Percentage distribution of household heads, by monthly income and main income source, Pingling, 1996	74
Table 3.4. No. of agricultural machines, by type, Nanshangzhao, 1996	78
Table 3.5. Contraceptive use of married women under 40, by method and number of children, Nanshangzhao Village, mid-1996	92
Table 4.1. Distribution of the elderly, by selected socio-demographic indicators, Pingling, 1996	100
Table 4.2. Distribution of households, by living arrangements and selected indicators of economic well-being, Pingling, 1996	113
Table 4.3. Distribution of household head, by sex and age group, Pingling, 1996	118
Table 4.4. Distribution of household head, by age group and household type, in household with persons aged 60+, Pingling, 1996	119
Table 4.5. Distribution of major decision-maker in three-generation households, by age of household heads and activity, Pingling, 1996	120
Table 5.1. Percentage distribution of old persons, by sex and household structure, Pingling, 1996	134
Table 5.2. Percentage distribution of old persons, by sex and coresident family members, Pingling, 1996	134
Table 5.3. Percentage distribution of old persons, by age group and selected form of living arrangements, Pingling, 1996	137
Table 5.4. Percentage distribution of old persons living with their spouse, by age group and sex Pingling, 1996	140
Table 5.5. Distribution of old persons and married adult household heads, by age group and number of living children, Pingling, 1996	142
Table 5.6. Percentage distribution of non-resident old persons, by sex and selected indicators of geographical availability of children, Pingling, 1996	144

Table 5.7.	Percentage distribution of old persons, by form of economic support and selected indicators, Pingling, 1996	146
Table 5.8.	Percentage distribution of old persons, by monthly living expenditure and selected indicators, Pingling, 1996	149
Table 6.1.	Percentage distribution of respondents to the question about ideal number of persons in household, by selected indicators, Pingling, 1996	184
Table 6.2.	Percentage distribution of respondents to the question about ideal number of generations in household, by selected indicators, Pingling, 1996	187
Table 6.3.	Correlation coefficients between dependent and selected independent variables ($p < 0.05$)	188
Table 6.4.	Percentage distribution of responses to the question whether young people should coreside with elderly parents, by selected indicators, Pingling, 1996	191
Table 6.5.	Percentage distribution of responses, by reasons for supporting coresidence, by selected indicators, Pingling, 1996	194
Table 6.6.	Percentage distribution of respondents under 60, by expected form of old-age support, by selected indicators, Pingling, 1996	198
Table 6.7.	Distribution of married women under 40, by number and sex of children, Pingling, 1996	201

LIST OF FIGURES

	Page
Figure 1.1. Population age-sex structure, China, 1990	16
Figure 1.2. Path diagram presenting the conceptual links between fertility decline, socio-economic development, population ageing, the family old-age support system, and assumptions of family's old-age security strategies	30
Figure 1.3. Analytical framework for assessing the likelihood and extent of family support for the elderly	33

LIST OF MAPS

	Page
Map 3.1. Shaanxi Province of China	55
Map 3.2. A sketch map of Pingling Township and its surrounding areas	62
Map 3.3. A sketch map of Nanshangzhao Village	65

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1. The research issue in context

In recent years, population ageing as a result of demographic transition and its effect on old-age support in developing countries have begun to attract the attention of demographers and policy-makers throughout the world (UN, 1982, 1994; Andrews, 1992). Different countries and regions have different characteristics of population dynamics. Understandably, population ageing is manifest in some places and incipient in others. It is evident that population ageing is well under way in most developed countries where demographic transition is almost completed at very low levels of fertility and mortality. Most developing countries, on the other hand, are undergoing various stages of demographic transition. Their populations are still quite young because fertility in these countries started to decline only recently. Nevertheless, according to UN projections, population ageing will proceed in future much more rapidly in developing countries than it did in developed ones (UN, 1994).

It is widely believed that in the West ageing took place in the context of industrialisation and urbanisation. In developing countries, however, this nexus between the development of an urban-industrial economy and population ageing may not be as close. Therefore, ageing in developing countries will occur not only in a different cultural context but also in a different socio-economic context (Jones, 1993). Much of the interest in the consequences of population ageing in developing countries focuses on the security and support for the aged as individuals and as a generation. Old-age security is defined here as the financial and material resources available to the elderly after they withdraw from productive activities. Understandably, old-age security is closely linked to the status and economic well-being of the elderly, and changes constantly in line with social and economic development.

At the moment, a Western-style social security system is not widely established in

most developing countries. The family remains the principal provider of old-age support. However, families are expected to deal with the challenges of ageing precisely at the moment when they are under severe and virtually implacable pressures. Even if social and cultural norms of providing for the elderly remain strong, the physical capability of the family to cope with the rising needs of the elderly will be weakened because the survival of parents will increase and the number of children, and their availability, will decline as results of rapid fertility decline and drastic socio-economic transformations. The elderly are facing difficulty or uncertainty in securing an assured source of support in old age. Governments are expected to adopt an integrated approach towards old-age support, in which family support is supplemented by public services (UN, 1994).

China is the most populous country in the world with a total population of over 1.2 billion in 1995. It has long been a consensus among Chinese scholars and policy-makers that rapid population growth has an adverse effect on China's socio-economic development. Over the last few decades, remarkable achievements have been made to reduce fertility through massive family planning programs. Since the early 1970s China's total fertility rate dropped from 5.8 in 1970 to 2.14 in 1990. With sustained fertility decline and extended life expectancy, the process of population ageing begins. Cowgill and Holmes (1970) have proposed that a population should be considered as 'aged' when the proportion of people aged 65 and over reaches 10 per cent. Judged by this definition, China's population is still youthful with the aged accounting for 5.6 per cent in 1990. However, as today's huge cohorts of young adults grow old after about 2010, China will have an enormous aged population (Table 1.1).

The process of ageing can hardly be changed because of the underlying age structure of the population. What remains to be answered is how the numerous elderly can be adequately provided for under the prevailing socio-economic circumstances. Family support for the elderly is deeply rooted in the traditional Chinese society. Although an old-age pension scheme was introduced as early as in the 1950s, its coverage is limited to public servants and employees of state-owned enterprises in cities. For the majority of the elderly living in rural areas, the family is still the core of their

support. Since the late 1970s, rural China has experienced two drastic reforms: economic reform characterised by the Household Responsibility System that replaced communal farming with family farming, and population reform characterised by coercive birth control campaigns, including the controversial One-Child Policy. Imposed directly by the Government, both reforms have significant consequences for the elderly, their families and the existing old-age support system.

Government policies in two relevant areas require that the family's role in old-age support be continuously preserved and strengthened in rural China. On the one hand, the Government is unable under the current socio-economic circumstances to establish a Western style social security system in rural areas. As the government's 10-year reform guideline requires, the support of the aged in rural areas should be shouldered chiefly by their families and supplemented by community assistance (CCP Central Committee, 1993). Strong family support in old-age security is essential for maintaining the general well-being of the elderly, so that they can share with others the full benefit of modernisation. On the other hand, the government adheres firmly to its commitment to birth control policies. Given the evident old-age support motives of high fertility (Kagitcibasi, 1982; Nugent, 1985, 1990), strong family support in old-age security is also crucial to the success of family planning programs.

A number of studies have been conducted by demographers in China in recent years on population ageing and its effect on old-age security. However, detailed information about the mechanism of old-age support at micro level is still far from adequate. This thesis tries to fill this gap of knowledge based on a micro-demographic community study in a Shaanxi village. Broadly, the three main research issues are: the current status and well-being of the elderly, the familial support system for the elderly, and the expectations and strategies of old-age security of rural people in response to the current low level of fertility and a functional return to family farming in rural China.

1.2. A brief review of literature on family support for the elderly

1.2.1. The central role of the family in old-age support

It is widely agreed that family is the basic unit in human society. 'Family' and 'household' are two terms that can be found frequently in the literature; theoretically, however, there are certain differences between them. The family can be viewed as a product of purely demographic factors such as fertility, mortality and nuptiality, whereas a household is more or less a socio-economic entity. A family consists of two or more members who are related, while a household can include unrelated persons. Although it is argued that household affiliations are key factors affecting old people (UN, 1994), this study chooses to use the more conventional term of family support, rather than household support, in the discussion of old-age security.

Older persons are often subject to special needs for support as they withdraw from productive activities because of age and frailty. Kane and Kane (1981) have identified four areas in which the elderly have special needs for assistance both as individuals and as a population group: physical, mental, social and economic. As the 1982 World Assembly on Ageing pointed out in its final report, families play a central role in the support of old people throughout the world (UN, 1982). Recent studies on population ageing and its socio-economic implications in developing countries also reveal that in virtually all countries discussed, the family is regarded as the principal supporter, carer and home-provider for old people (Andrews, 1992). Hashimoto and Kendig (1992) concluded from a cross-nation study that wherever the family persists, family support persists - even if it is not always fully adequate and available to all older people. The concepts of family support vary according to the ways in which particular cultures, societies, and individuals perceive and define the boundaries and responsibilities of the family. In societies where the nuclear family is the norm, support is provided primarily by spouses or children. In societies where extended families are the norm, family members of other generations or collateral kin are sometimes involved as well. Family

support and co-residence with family are not always identical. Support from non-resident family members should also be taken into account. Mason (1992) argued that it is important to distinguish between economic support and physical care. The former can be accomplished impersonally, while the latter requires the personal ministrations of a care giver. Since this study is concerned primarily with old-age security, the focus here is the economic aspect of family support. Family care and its relation with institutional care are not discussed in detail in this section.

In industrialised countries, the elderly prefer to live in their own dwellings while maintaining close contact with other generations located nearby (Sussman, 1985). The family still plays an indispensable role in providing social and emotional support for the elderly. The state, on the other hand, has assumed major responsibilities for income support, in addition to various self-financing programs. In most developing countries where the monetised economy is yet to be fully established, family support takes diverse forms (Caldwell, 1976). Most frequently the support is provided in the form of shared housing, food and other necessities through co-residence. Martin (1990) described co-residence as a part of a retirement contract in more agrarian developing societies. Under these conditions, one or more children move in with parents, gradually assume responsibility for the household and eventually take over headship. Occasionally, non-resident children also send gifts or other in-kind benefits, or offer labour service. Direct monetary assistance, including regular paid living allowances, remittances and pocket money, usually plays a lesser role. These transfers are more likely to be paid by those children who live apart from their parents or who have migrated (Knodel and Debavalya, 1992). Meanwhile, the younger members of the family almost exclusively provide support and care in times of illness and disability.

1.2.2. Factors influencing the family support

Hashimoto and Kendig (1992) have identified four main factors at macro level that can influence family support for the aged in each society: demographic, economic, political and cultural. They influence not only the type and quality of support, but also the

relative balance between care provided by families and that provided by the state. Demographic factors, such as population ageing, migration, and family composition, set limits for the potential availability of family support. Modernisation, industrialisation and urbanisation have major effect on the status of the aged and family organisation. A transition from an agrarian economy to an industrial and moneyed economy reduces the control by older people over key resources, affecting eventually their status and well-being. Government policies will also influence the redistribution of resources between families and the state. Cultural norms and values shape the course of family ties which structure reciprocal support patterns. This is particularly true in East Asian countries where the Confucian values of filial piety and ancestor worship have a strong influence. Children are under heavy obligations towards their parents, and to support their parents in old age is seen as a sacred duty (Cowgill, 1986). Also at macro level, McDonald (1989) thought the extent to which families provide support will depend upon five factors: cultural or legal prescriptions and the level of adherence to those prescriptions, the demographic availability of family members, the geographic availability of family members, the economic capacity of family members to provide support and the willingness of family members to provide support. Changes in these factors will eventually bring about changes in the family support system.

Mason (1992) has developed a model to illustrate from five aspects the effects of macro-economic and social changes on family support and care of the elderly. First, a shift from familial production to wage employment will erode parental power and control over the younger generation, and reduce the likelihood of co-residence of the elderly with their children. Second, increased labour participation of women as a result of industrialisation is likely to reduce the availability of care givers at home. Third, increased schooling, accompanied by the spread of Western ideas, may break down traditional values and norms, such as those favouring high fertility and filial piety. The elderly may be faced with a shortage of willing providers in the younger generation. Fourth, increased migration may result in physical separation of the senior and younger generations and a decrease in multi-generational households. However, there is one important process in development, that is, the rising per capita income that may improve

the welfare of the elderly, who may achieve greater financial independence through personal wealth accumulation or state transfers, or receive more financial assistance from their wealthier children.

Myers (1992) believed family-related issues should be dealt with from an intergenerational perspective, which is far more complex than aggregative analyses of population structure and dynamics. The macro effects can only be materialised through a number of intermediate factors at micro levels, such as age and sex, marital status of the aged, number of children, kin availability, household structures, and living arrangements:

1. It is understandable that age is closely linked to an older person's physical ability. The more advanced the age, the greater the need for support as well as for care. Sex may also make a difference. In traditional patriarchal families, it is the senior males who have control of family resources and power over women and young men. Females, marginalised and powerless, are at particular risk of non-support and non-care in old ages (Mason, 1992; Rudkin, 1993).

2. The concern over the marital status is based on the fact that spouses provide a main share of support and care for older persons in need. Single, widowed, and divorced or separated persons at older ages are the most vulnerable and needy. It is worth noting that widowed women make up a large proportion of the aged population in developing countries because of two factors. First, early widowhood is common in both sexes because the death rate has been high until quite recently. However, females have a higher survival chance than males due to differential mortality. Second, the remarriage rate of females is much lower than that of males. In many traditional cultures, the remarriage of widows is strongly discouraged, or even forbidden. Unable to get access to family resources or accrue financial security from paid employment during their lifetimes, elderly widows tend to depend entirely on family support and assistance (Cowgill, 1986; Chen and Jones, 1989).

3. Since children are a major source of support, their number always plays a crucial

role, if their ability and willingness are not taken into account. There is considerable evidence to show that old-age security is still a primary motive for high fertility in developing countries (Kagitcibasi, 1982; Nugent, 1985; De Vos, 1985; Cain, 1986). In many Asian countries there is a strong preference of sons, because sons have more responsibility for financial support, while daughters have more responsibility for instrumental and emotional support. Not surprisingly, childless older persons are usually trapped in a difficult position.

4. The question of household structures is also of direct relevance. Chen (1992) asserted that there is a negative correlation between parents' financial independence and the probability of co-residence. In developing countries, the extended family is still the prevailing norm, where older parents co-reside with their adult children and depend on their support. By contrast, most old people in Western countries are financially independent and live alone or only with a spouse.

1.2.3. Family support as intergenerational transfers

Family support for the aged can be seen as part of intergenerational transfers of income and services between the aged and adult children. There have been for decades two fundamentally different theories existing side by side about intergenerational transfers: the 'role reversal' model and the 'role continuity' model. The former suggests that intergenerational family transfers are related to the life cycle in a curvilinear fashion, with the middle aged being net providers for the young and elderly (Sussman, 1965). The latter holds that each generation in the family continuously redistributes resources to its successors. Parents continue benefiting their children even into advanced old age, except in the cases of extreme hardship (Moore, 1966). Both theories can find substantial supporting evidence in empirical studies. The 'role reverse' model is more or less applicable to the situation in developing countries, whereas the 'role continuity' model is more or less applicable to the situation in industrialised countries. To reconcile the controversy between the two schools, Covey (1983) has developed a structural model suggesting that the relative strength of obligation to transfer resources and the relative

capacity to fulfil the obligation between generations are primary determinants of the direction of intergenerational wealth flow. In comparison, Laitner (1997) proposed two theoretical models from a purely economic point of view, based largely on observations in the Western societies. The altruistic preference approach deals with the parent household transferring resources to the child household instead of selling them, while the transactions cost approach looks at the benefits of inter-household transactions outside the normal market channels.

According to the wealth flow theory proposed by Caldwell (1976), however, the direction of intergenerational wealth flow can be altered. In primitive and traditional societies the net flow is from children to parents, whereas in industrial societies wealth generally flows in the opposite direction. The decisive factors here are modernisation and Westernisation. Although it is designed primarily to explain the changes in fertility, the wealth flow theory also sheds some light on reasons why family support for the aged is still prevailing in most areas of developing countries (Hugo, 1995). It is worth noting that a shift in intergenerational flow resulting from modernisation might put the welfare of the aged in jeopardy, since resources previously channelled to them are redirected to the younger generation. Therefore, it is easy to understand why the elderly in developing countries are more dependent at present on control of resources for old-age security, in order to ensure that one of their children or relatives will care for them if and when they become unable to provide for themselves.

Hashimoto and Kendig (1992) noticed in a number of empirical studies a pattern of 'two-way' interdependency between elderly parents and adult children rather than a one way dependency of parents on children. While being provided for by their children, parents still remain as direct contributors in the productive and domestic economies. This is particularly true in developing countries where older persons, unlike their counterparts in industrialised countries who usually retire after reaching retirement age, tend to remain economically active till very advanced ages (Chang, 1992). The contributions of the elderly are usually sex-segregated. Old men tend to assist in agricultural work such as ploughing, harvesting, and watering the fields, while old women lend a hand in daily

housework like cooking, housekeeping and care of grandchildren (Kim and Choe, 1992; Andrews and Hennink, 1992 Dharmalingam, 1994). Even in more developed countries, intergenerational transfers from older persons to their children or other young relatives are not uncommon. The problem is that, as Kotlikoff (1988) observed, such transfers are usually unmeasured, since they may take the form of 'implicit gifts'. Therefore, the contribution of older people should be appreciated in the context of interdependencies between family members of all ages.

1.2.4. Family support and state support, or integration of the two

Family support is often discussed in relation to state or public support, within a general division between informal and formal support systems. The combination and complementarity of the two vary widely from one society to another owing to factors like economic conditions, political and social structure, and cultural tradition. In between, there are various kinds of community and neighbourhood supports, viewed as supplements or alternatives to family and state support systems. In industrial countries, income support and aged care have long been institutionalised. In developing countries, by contrast, old-age support is largely still provided by families. The most crucial aspect of this family support system is co-residence with adult children. The availability of formal support sponsored by the state is limited in terms of duration, size and coverage (Hashimoto and Kendig, 1992; Chang, 1992; Jones, 1993). Chen and Jones (1989) observed that in most low-income countries in Asia, the current formal pension schemes only cover a small proportion of the population, such as civil servants and employees of state-owned enterprises. The financing of these schemes is usually compulsory income-contributory rather than taxation based.

Therefore, Cowgill and Holmes (1972) argued that, as economic development proceeds, the source of old-age security is likely to be switched from the family support system to the public support system, or from family-based mutual aid to social security programs. Based on data of 52 countries in both developed and developing regions around 1980, Ogawa (1994) concluded that the share of gross domestic product (GDP)

allocated to the provision of social security benefits rises with per capita gross national product (GNP) measured in US dollars. However, there are substantial differences among different countries even if their levels of economic development are comparable. Ogawa suggests that cultural, political, and demographic factors should be examined in further detail. Worach-Kardas (1983) suggested that family responsibility for the elderly, as opposed to public responsibility, is often a function of economic conditions even in the same economy. The state's responsibility looks different in times of prosperity than in times of crisis.

The insufficient state support for the aged in developing countries is attributed to limited resources at the government's disposal. Poor economies simply cannot afford a system of social security that could provide even a minimally adequate safety net for their aged population. In this context, family support is the only alternative. This does not necessarily mean that families will be always willing to give support when there are other viable options (Jones, 1993). Lack of government commitment is another reason why state support programs progress so slowly. To most governments in developing countries, the fundamental dilemma is whether or not scarce resources should be devoted to a group which is not considered as an investment in human capital for development, especially when the overall level of resource availability is subject to external factors like foreign trade. Some policy-makers tend to have negative and stereotypical views about the experiences of Western countries (Martin, 1988). They are not only aware of a variety of dilemmas in maintaining social security programs, but also fear that a creeping Westernisation will erode the old family values and traditions appreciated as a stabiliser in the face of the forces of economic and social change (El-Badry, 1986). As a result, in recent years some governments have adopted intervention measures to strengthen the traditional familial system, including legislation to require children to look after their parents (Knodel, Chayovan, and Siriboon, 1992; McDonald and Soriano, 1994).

It is widely believed that the traditional familial system of old-age support is under constant pressure of accelerated population ageing and rapid socio-economic changes. On the basis of the experiences of the West, Petri (1982) assumed that

conditions in developing countries will eventually change to such an extent that the modern systems of pension, insurance and markets for care of the aged may become viable and appropriate. In recent empirical studies, expectations of help from children are also found to be declining among married couples, particularly those living in cities. There is an increasing demand for formal support services (Chen and Jones, 1989; Martin, 1990; Meada and Shimizu, 1992; Kim and Choe, 1992). Chang (1992) and Knodel, Chayovan and Siriboon (1992) predicted that in the future the characteristics and expectations of the elderly will be different from those of today. The future elderly will be generally better educated, more urbanised and financially more independent. They may well choose to purchase greater privacy and autonomy in living arrangements. One might tentatively conclude that developing countries will probably follow Western patterns whereby, with economic development, many parents neither expect nor receive economic or other forms of assistance from their children in old age.

However, other scholars doubt the necessity for developing countries to follow eventually the Western practice of introducing a formal old-age support system, owing to differences in social, economic and cultural background (McCallum, 1988). It is in both the government's and the future old people's interest to preserve the familial system of support. Rather than trying to design a new formal system that is likely to be excessively expensive, it may be worthwhile to consider ways in which the traditional system may be made both more flexible and more robust to survive the stresses of modernisation (Tout, 1989; Jones, 1993). A variety of policy recommendations have been put forward. At the macro-level, some suggest strengthening government intervention to reinforce traditional values (McCallum, 1988). Others suggest maintaining the prevailing social norm that requires parents to invest in their children and children to repay those investments by caring for their parents in old age (Nugent, 1990). At micro-level, some suggest fostering the forces of co-operation within the family by keeping key family resources always in the hands of family heads, so that they can control disobedient children (Nugent, 1990). Others suggest using birth-spacing to achieve small family size without jeopardising parents' old-age security (Enke and Brown, 1972). Trading off quantity for quality is considered another effective option. If parents expect to rely on children for security

later, the best strategy could be to produce one or two successful children who will have adequate means of support (De Vos, 1985).

To ensure that the elderly population in developing countries will lead a happy and secure life in old age, perhaps a pragmatic strategy is to integrate the two support systems, so that the best of traditional and modern approaches can be fully employed. The ESCAP Population Division (1994) recommended an integrated approach towards the support of the elderly, including a balanced development of cash assistance, in-kind services, and a combination of public and family efforts. The Japanese experience is frequently cited as an example. Palmore (1975) pointed out that while the economic system in Japan has become similar to that of other industrialised nations, Japan's distinctive social system and cultural traditions have nevertheless maintained a high degree of integration for the aged. These values and practices may be worthy of preserving and transplanting. For example, 64.6 per cent of Japanese aged 65 and over lived with their children in 1985. Over 40 per cent of married middle-aged sons still provided financial support to their ageing parents (Meada and Shimizu, 1992). Meanwhile, the government has been implementing a host of old-age support programs ranging from home helpers to tax-exempt schemes. Ogawa (1992) thinks the Japanese experience for old-age support through traditional familial and public systems may be relevant to policy makers in developing countries in future.

1.3. Changing age structure of the Chinese population, 1953-2050

Any study on ageing related topics is incomplete without a brief review of the trend and pattern of the population ageing in China, for two obvious reasons: one is the sheer magnitude of the problem or the absolute number of people involved, and the other is the accelerated momentum for population ageing that is already built into age structure as a result of the tortuous course of demographic transition over the last few decades. Based on selected indicators from census data and projection results, Table 1.1 illustrates the trend and pattern of population ageing in China during the period from 1953 to 2050.

For measuring population ageing, one of the most frequently used indicators is the proportion of the aged in the total population. Cowgill and Holmes (1970) have proposed that populations should be considered as 'young' when the proportion of the population aged 65 and over remains under 5 per cent, and should be considered 'aged' when the proportion of the elderly reaches 10 per cent. It is believed that 65 is an age when a large segment of the population has significant physical, economic and social needs. However, the document of the 1982 World Assembly on Ageing suggests that it is practical to take 60 years and over as the criterion of the elderly in developing countries where elderly mortality is still high (UN, 1982). In China, the cut-off age for the elderly is set at 60 in most official publications.

Table 1.1: Changes in population age structure, China, 1953-2050

Year	Total population (million)	% Population aged			Total elderly population (million)	Ageing index (65+/0-14)*100	Median age
		0-14	15-64	65+			
1953	587.9	36.3	59.3	4.4	25.9	12.1	21.7
1964	705.0	40.7	55.8	3.5	24.7	8.6	19.2
1982	1016.5	33.6	61.5	4.9	49.8	14.6	22.9
1990	1143.3	27.7	66.7	5.6	64.0	20.1	25.3
2000 ^a	1282.0	25.7	67.2	7.1	91.0	27.6	28.9
2010 ^a	1372.8	20.5	71.3	8.2	112.6	40.0	33.2
2020 ^a	1460.3	19.8	68.9	11.3	165.0	57.1	35.4
2030 ^a	1500.0	18.5	66.5	15.0	225.0	81.1	38.5
2040 ^a	1499.6	17.1	63.5	19.4	290.9	113.4	40.6
2050 ^a	1468.8	17.4	63.1	19.4	284.9	112.1	40.3

Source: Reconstructed from Sun, 1994.

Note: ^a The medium variant projected by the Population Statistics Department, SBS.

Between 1953 and 1964 the number of people aged 65 and over did not vary much, remaining about 25 million. Since the total population of China increased from 587.9 million to 705.0 million during this period, the corresponding proportion of the elderly in fact decreased from 4.4 per cent to 3.5 per cent. This trend toward a younger population occurred primarily because of high birth rates and rapidly declining infant and child mortality rates, resulting in the proportion of children aged 0-14 rising from 36.3 to 40.7 per cent.

Shryock and Siegel (1971) suggested that the aged-child ratio (also referred to as ageing index) may be the best measure of population ageing because this measure includes the two population subgroups which change the most during the demographic transition. Accordingly, China's ageing ratio fell during this period from 12.1 to 8.6 per cent.

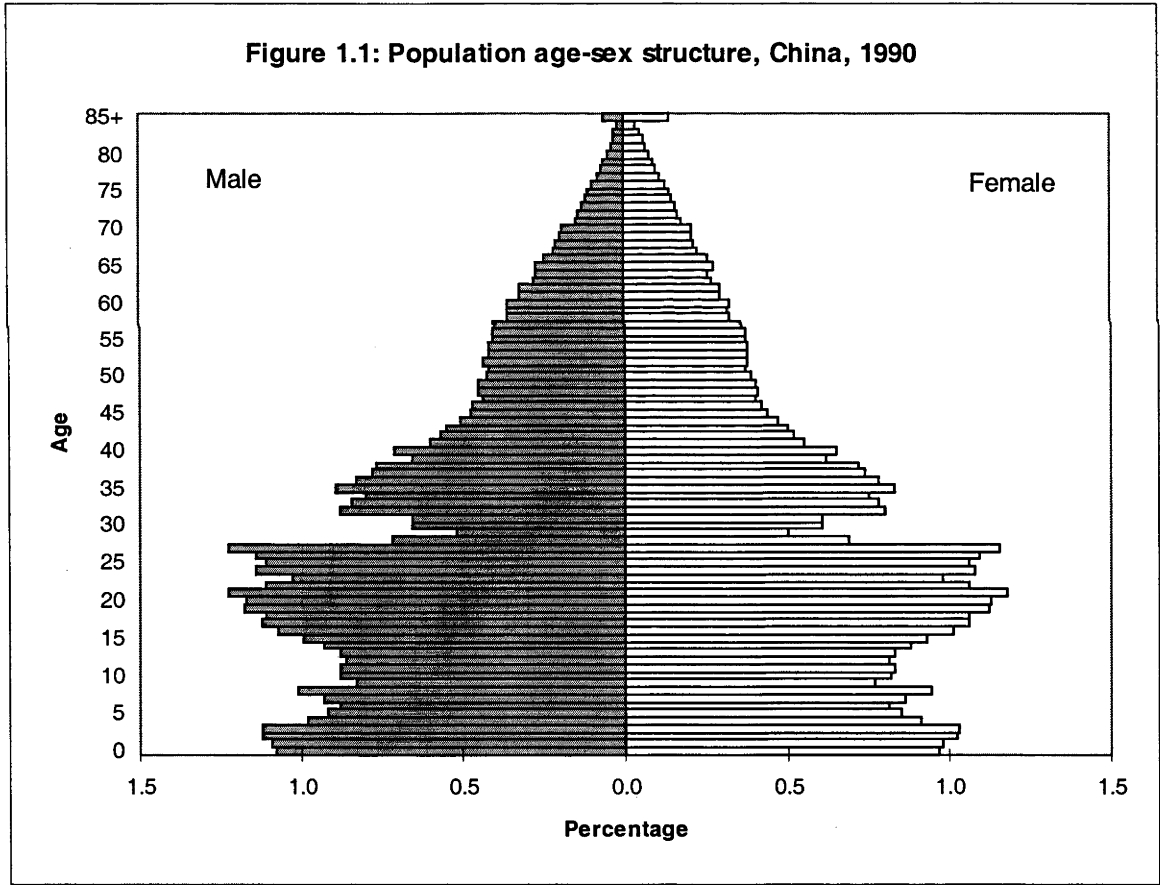
The median age is an indicator frequently used to analyse the central tendency of age distribution of a population. According to Shryock and Siegel (1971), populations with medians under 20 may be described as 'young', those with medians 30 or over as 'old', and those with medians 20 to 29 as of 'intermediate' age. When the median age rises, the population may be said to be 'ageing', and when it falls, the population may be said to be growing younger. From 1953 to 1964, China's population was in fact 'juvenescing' rather than ageing, with the median age falling from 22.7 to 20.2.

Regular measures for examining population ageing also include age dependency ratio and familial support ratio. The age dependency ratio is derived from the young (aged 0-14) and old (aged 65 and over) populations divided by the working-age (aged 15-65) population. The numerator is supposed to approximate the economically dependent population while the denominator represents the economically active population. In practice, this measure should be used with special caution, particularly when increases in the proportion of older persons occur along with decreases in the proportion of young persons as displayed in Table 1.1. The familial support ratio is of great value in the discussion of old-age support. By measuring the relative size of two cohorts, commonly the age group 45-49 relative to those 65-79, this measure can provide a rough approximation of the availability of children to older persons for assistance.

Between 1964 and 1982, China's total population increased from 705.0 to 1,016.5 million. While China's population growth was still dominated by the increase in young people, there were also indications of the elderly catching up in number and proportion. During this period the total elderly doubled from 24.3 to 49.4 million, and their corresponding proportion rose from 3.5 per cent to 4.9 per cent. As a result, the ageing

index rose from 8.8 to 14.6 per cent. The increase of median age from 20.2 to 22.9 also indicates that Chinese population started getting mature, if not old.

When the fourth National Census was conducted in 1990 China's population stood at 1,143.3 million. During eight years from 1982, the number of the elderly increased from 49.4 million to 63.4 million. With the proportion of the elderly exceeding 5 per cent (5.6 per cent), the Chinese population as a whole could no longer be considered as 'young'. Meanwhile, the ageing index went up from 22.7 to 31.0 per cent, and the median age from 22.9 to 25.3.



Source: Reconstructed from Population Statistics Department, SBS, 1993.

As a result of the continuous demographic transition, China's population as a whole is now gradually moving from a young population to the early stage of an adult population. However, the drastic course the demographic transition took over the last few

decades in China has had a great impact on the shape of the current population age structure, as illustrated by the population pyramid in Figure 1.1. The current age structure, in turn, will influence China's future trends and patterns of population growth in general, and population ageing in particular.

As can be seen, the shape of China's population pyramid is unique, with two apparent bulges followed by a shrinking base. The first bulge reflects the baby-boom period of the early 1950s, and the second that of the 1960s. The narrow contraction in between is caused by the 1959-1962 famine. Generally speaking, China's population pyramid among people aged 20 and above in 1990 is in the shape of an obtuse triangle with a very wide base, typical for a population during the expansion phase of population transition. In contrast, the number of people in younger age groups under 20 decreased drastically, as a direct result of the massive birth control programs since the 1970s, including the controversial One-Child policy. The growth of population aged 0-4 in the five-year period before the 1990 census can largely be attributed to the effect of growth momentum with the large baby-boomer cohorts now entering reproductive ages. At present, the process of demographic transition in China is far from complete. Even if fertility can be controlled at a low level in future through the joint effect of government intervention and socio-economic development, the total population will still keep growing. The drastic fluctuation will also keep repeating itself before finally being ironed out by time.

Both the Third National Census of 1982 and the Fourth National Census of 1990 have produced quite reliable statistics for demographic analysis. In recent years numerous population projections have been made for China based on the census data by demographers at home and abroad (Bongaarts and Greenhalgh, 1985; Ogawa, 1988; Banister, 1992; Sun, 1994). From these projections, it is easy to understand the future magnitude, trends and patterns of population ageing in China. Understandably, projection results differ from one source to another since different assumptions are used. Most commonly three fertility assumptions (high, medium and low) and one mortality assumption are used to illustrate a range of outcomes. One mortality assumption is used

largely because China already has a mortality schedule and a life expectancy at birth comparable to that of many developed nations. Further improvements may occur more slowly in the future (Banister, 1992).

Results of the population projection made by the State Bureau of Statistics (SBS) in 1994 are widely cited in government publications (Sun, 1994). Based on the 1990 census data, total population and other relevant indicators have been estimated for the period 1990-2050 in high, medium and low variants. The fertility level as represented by the TFR is assumed for the medium variant to drop from 2.1 in 1990 to 1.9 in 2000, and bounce back to 2.0 after 2010. The average life expectancy, on the other hand, will rise from 68.4 in 1990 to 71.2 in 2000, and further to 79.1 in 2050.

From 1990 to 2020, China's total population will increase from 1,143.3 million to 1,460.3 million, and the number of the elderly will rise from 64.0 million to 165.0 million. With the proportion of the elderly surpassing the 10 per cent benchmark (11.3 per cent), China's population as a whole can be labelled as aged. During this period, the annual increase rate of the elderly population is about 3.3 per cent, over three times higher than the national average of 0.9 per cent. It is largely attributable to the fact that people born during the baby-boom periods in the 1950s and 1960s begin to enter retirement age. Meanwhile, the proportion of children under 15 will decline further from 27.7 to 19.8 per cent, assuming the fertility is kept at a relatively low level. During this 30-year period, the ageing index will increase by almost three times from 20.1 to 57.1 per cent, and the median age will go up by 10 years from 25.3 to 35.4.

The process of population ageing will continue over the subsequent years. After reaching the historic peak of 1,500 million in 2030, China's total population is expected to decline, as the annual increase rate starts to turn negative. By 2050, the total population will stand at 1,468.8 million. In contrast, the number of the elderly will keep growing from 165.0 million in 2020 to 286.4 million in 2050. Most remarkably, the proportion of the elderly will almost double from 11.3 per cent to 19.5 per cent. Compared with the previous period from 1990 to 2020, however, the growth rate of the aged population will

slow down, with the annual growth rate cut by half from 3.3 to 1.6 per cent. This is simply because the effect of baby booms is gradually fading out. Since fertility still remains at a low level, the proportion of children aged 0-14 will fall further from 19.8 per cent in 2020 to 17.4 in 2050. For the first time in history, the elderly will outnumber children under 15 in China's total population, as shown in the ageing index exceeding 100 per cent (112.1 per cent in 2050). Meanwhile, the median age will reach 40.3 with another five years added on.

Generally speaking, during the first three decades of the projection period from 1990 to 2020, population ageing in China will be characterised predominantly by acceleration. During the second three decades from 2020 to 2050, it is the sheer size and proportion of the aged population that deserve major concern. In studies on the future trend of population ageing in China, these two features should not be confused with each other.

1.4. The family and old-age support in China

1.4.1. Changing structure of Chinese families

Family support for the aged is rooted deeply in the old Chinese traditions. It is interesting to notice that many sociology textbooks in the West include a chapter or two describing the structure and role of the Chinese family, because the traditional or Confucian family in Chinese society is often considered as a sharp contrast to that in Western societies (Cowgill, 1986; Whyte, 1997). The fact is that, even if such a stereotype did exist in the past, families in contemporary China are experiencing tremendous changes, particularly in the new institutional and moral environment since 1949.

A 'normative' Chinese family is characterised as a patrilineal, patriarchal and extended system, where several generations live together under the male head of the family. Cohen (1976) described the Chinese family first as a collective economic unit

having a common budget and common property. There was an active management of the family economy, often, but not necessarily, by the oldest male of the senior generation. The Chinese family was secondly a religious unit responsible for performing the rites required for the well-being of both living and deceased members of the family. Finally, the Chinese family was a social security organisation that provided for the care of its needy and ageing members. In contrast to Western societies, the Confucian traditions gave top importance to family values, family loyalty and family obligations, apart from the large extended family norm. Every member of the family was held in check by duty and obedience, and the family head usually enjoyed absolute authority. Filial piety was so highly valued that grown children were expected to show deference and respect to the elderly, follow parental decisions, and care for the elderly. Filial children would be rewarded with access to the resources of the senior generation, such as land in rural areas. Caring for the elderly parents and the inheritance of property were the basic concerns of sons. Sons-in-law were only counted upon when there were no male heirs in the family. Any violation of filial obligations, not surprisingly, would be censured by public opinion or punished by law (Cowgill, 1986; Yuan, Wang and Song, 1992; Ikels, 1993).

An ideal Chinese family, according to the ancient belief, consisted of up to five generations, and for the elderly, being able to live in such a family was an ultimate happiness. The truth is, however, that the five-generation family was a rarity, and the nuclear family (up to two generations) and the stem family (commonly three generations) accounted for a very high percentage of Chinese families. According to a survey on family structure in rural China in the 1930s, the nuclear (one- and two-generation) families made up 51.4 per cent, and three-generation families 40.2 per cent (Zhang, 1990). When children grew up, daughters almost inevitably left the parental home on marriage, whereas sons often brought their wives into the family and continued to live with their parents. Nevertheless, the most common instance was that only one son would live eventually with the parents, and others moved out to set up new homes of their own.

Family size is dependent not only on family structure, but also on the number of surviving children or adopted children. The Chinese traditionally preferred a large family

with many children, particularly many sons. Sons were especially desired as necessary labour because of the heavy manual nature of farming. They were also expected to provide for the parents in old age, and bear responsibility in the practice of ancestor worship. A family would do its best to beget more sons, thus multiplying the blessings and insuring against accident. The common expression of good wishes 'more sons, more happiness' represented exactly the prevailing feelings about the importance of male descendants. It is widely believed that fertility in traditional China was very high. Banister (1992) asserted that a total fertility rate of 5-6 births per woman, corresponding to a crude birth rate of about 40 per thousand, is a reasonable fertility estimate. However, because of widespread poverty and a high level of mortality, only a small number of children could survive to adulthood in each family. The actual size of the Chinese family was, therefore, quite moderate. From 1911 to 1947, the average family size in China remained more or less stable at about 5.2-5.4 persons (Zhang, 1990).

Since the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, tremendous changes have taken place in every aspect of social life as a result of newly established political and economic orders. In spite of the numerous political and social upheavals in China over the last few decades, remarkable progress has been made in promoting economic growth and raising people's living standard. As predicted by the classic study on families by Goode (1963), socio-economic development encouraged nuclear families more focused on conjugal loyalties. Chinese families have now become increasingly nuclearised and diminished. According to the 1990 census results, nearly three quarters (72.3 per cent) of all families were nuclear with one or two generations. Three-generation stem families only accounted for 17.1 per cent. Very few families (1.3 per cent) still remained extended in structure. The regional difference in family structure is quite small. The proportion of three-generation families in rural areas was just 1.6 percentage points higher than that in urban areas. On the other hand, the average family size decreased gradually from 4.3 persons in the early 1950s to 3.9 persons in 1990. Rural families, 4.1 persons on average, were slightly larger than urban ones with 3.8 persons (Sun, 1994). Unlike in the traditional China where poverty was the major factor limiting family size, the current norm of the small family is largely a joint product of modernisation and

government birth control policies.

1.4.2. Old-age support as a component of the social security system in China

At present, China can be divided economically and socially roughly into two systems: a relatively advanced, industrialised and modern urban system and a relatively backward, agricultural and traditional rural system. Government policies applied to urban areas usually differ substantially from those applied to rural areas, including various social welfare programs and policies.

In theory, social welfare programs are designed to perform three major functions: to meet the basic needs of disadvantaged people through the provision of a safety net; to reduce inequality resulting from extreme disparities between the wealthy and the poor; and to serve as a mechanism for social integration (Leung and Nann, 1995). In China three factors have played a special role in the development of its social security programs and policies. First, China is a country upholding a state socialist ideology. A socialist country, according to the prevailing Marxist doctrine, is characterised by a centrally planned, egalitarian, and universal social policy. The government is supposed to promote social welfare by directly or indirectly subsidising the provision of basic social needs such as food, health care, and education. It also commits itself to devoting more resources to the poor to reduce inequality and promoting national solidarity. Second, China is a developing country with a huge population, just embarking on the course of modernisation and industrialisation. Unlike in most developed countries, the resources at the government's disposal in China are limited, and the economy cannot afford to introduce a complete social security system at the present stage. Third, China is a country where the influence of cultural traditions is still quite strong, particularly in rural areas. Some traditional values are not only tolerated, but also encouraged by the government.

Currently, the social security system in China consists of four major programs: (a) Social insurance: occupational and state social security programs covering the loss of income in contingencies, such as old age, unemployment, and health; (b) Social welfare:

collective welfare and community services, such as benefits provided by work units to their employees; (c) Social relief: services for the destitute, the poor and victims of natural disasters; (d) Preferential treatment: services for veterans and their families. In practice, however, these programs are carried out in different forms and with different emphases in urban and rural areas.

In urban areas, an old-age pension scheme was introduced as part of the Labour Insurance Regulations as far back as the 1950s, but it benefits only part of the urban population, mainly public servants and employees of state-owned enterprises. Nationally, the Ministry of Labour and Social Security is the highest government body of policy-making. At provincial and municipal levels, pension funds are managed by local labour and social security bureaus. Under the current scheme the legal age at retirement is 60 for men and 55 for women. Retirement pensions are generally set at 60-100 per cent of the final wage level depending on the occupation and the length of service. Old people who are outside the coverage can still benefit financially from other general social welfare programs, such as price subsidies and poverty relief programs. Since last two years, as a result of intensified reform measures to downsize redundancies, a large number of workers from the state-owned factories have been asked to take early retirement. Retirement age commonly dropped by five to seven years.

In 1992 the China Research Centre on Ageing conducted a survey on the aged population in 12 provinces and municipalities in China. Targeting old people aged 60 and over, the survey obtained a total of 20,083 responses, 9,889 from urban areas and 10,194 from rural areas (China Research Centre on Ageing, 1994). The findings may provide a rough idea how the pension programs worked in the early 1990. In urban areas, as shown in Table 1.2, over 90 percent (92.6) of old men and over 50 per cent (54.5) of old women were covered by the pension program. The higher coverage among the males is largely attributable to their higher rate of labour force participation, because the current pension system is employment-based. Females in China usually have fewer chances to find jobs in formal sectors, and, hence, are less likely to be eligible for pension benefits after retirement.

Table 1.2: Distribution of the elderly population aged 60 and over by pension coverage, sex and residence, China, 1992

	Males				Females			
	Covered	Not covered	Others ^a	Total	Covered	Not covered	Others ^a	Total
A. Urban								
Percent	92.6	5.9	1.5	100.0	54.5	45.2	0.2	100.0
No.	4,414	359	71	4,766	2,794	2,317	12	5,123
B. Rural								
Percent	11.3	88.4	0.2	100.0	0.7	99.3	0.1	100.0
No.	547	4,263	12	4,822	37	5,332	3	5,372

Source: Reconstructed from China Research Centre on Ageing, 1994.

Note: ^a Not retired from formal sector jobs.

In the countryside where the majority of China's elderly population live, a formal pension scheme is yet to be introduced. At present, it is a government policy that financial support of the aged should be shouldered by their families and supplemented by community assistance (CCP Central Committee, 1993). The drastic structural changes that took place in recent history have strongly influenced the type and quality of the familial support system in rural China. In the Land Reform in the early 1950s, every rural family was assigned a piece of land. This traditional pattern of land security with no landless poor afforded rural families their first opportunity to achieve the Confucian ideals such as care of the aged. In the late 1950s, a commune system was imposed in rural areas after a number of collectivisation efforts. Families, no longer a production unit, still played a central role in old-age support. The commune also provided an independent safety net for the elderly: like all villagers they were guaranteed a basic grain ration; and childless old people were entitled to the Five Guarantees that provide food, clothing, fuel, housing and funeral expenses. The commune system was then abolished in 1982 as part of rural economic reform, and in its place a household responsibility system was introduced by the government as a major reform measure. Farm land was leased out to individual households on contracts, and there was a functional return to family farming.

In the early 1990s, as Table 1.2 shows, rural elderly were considerably

disadvantaged in terms of pension coverage, in comparison to their urban counterparts. The proportion covered was only 11.3 per cent among old men and 0.7 per cent among old women. Without secured income, rural elderly were more likely to be dependent financially on assistance from others. In recent years, the gap between urban and rural areas in social security programs in general, and old-age pension schemes in particular, have attracted serious concerns among policy-makers and academics. In 1991 the State Council assigned the Ministry of Civil Affairs to work out a pilot program of old-age insurance for peasants, including workers in township enterprises. The program, formally the Basic Plan for Rural Social Pension Insurance (*nongcun shehui yanglao baoxian*), is based on three major principles: personal contribution, collective assistance, and state policy support. Insurance policy-holders are flexible to choose the level of premium and benefit in accordance to their own conditions. Supervised by the Ministry of Civil Affairs and managed by special organs under county governments, the program enjoys a broad range of preferential treatments, such as tax exemption. Still largely on a user-pays basis, the program offers rural residents for the first time a basic form of old-age insurance to supplement the existing system of family support. Recent experience indicates that the program is widely welcome in rural areas. By the end of 1995, 1,500 counties in 30 provinces had introduced the program, which covered a total of 50 million rural population and accumulated more than five billion *Yuan* of pension funds (Ministry of Civil Affairs, 1995).

Regardless of the pension system, families still play an important role in providing for the elderly in both urban and rural areas. In fact, the Government has made clear that old-age support is primarily a family responsibility. For example, both the Marriage Law and the Constitution stipulate that adult children have a duty to support and assist their parents. Similar requirements have been embodied in more detailed clauses in the Law concerning the Protection of the Rights and Interests of the Elderly, approved by the National Congress in August 1996. Chapter II is devoted specially to familial support for the elderly. Adult children, as stated in Clause 11, have the legal obligation to provide for the elderly parents with economic assistance, physical care and emotional support. Children are also required to provide housing, health care, and, in

rural areas, labour on contracted land plot. As for the old people who are childless or whose children are unable to fulfil their obligation, according to Chapter III, local governments should take the responsibility of care.

1.4.3. Recent research on old-age support in rural China

To identify emerging problems relating to old-age support, leading population research institutes have conducted a number of large-scale surveys of the aged population in China in recent years. The results are of special value for research and policymaking at both national and local levels. According to a 1987 survey by the Population Centre of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), co-residence was the main form of family support in rural areas: 58.0 per cent of the elderly reviewed lived in three-generation households and 26.9 per cent in two-generation households. As for the source of income, 52.6 per cent of elderly men and 80.7 per cent of elderly women were supported by their children (Tian, 1988). The above discussed 1992 survey by the China Research Centre on Ageing found that, in rural areas, over 87 per cent of the elderly lived with children, and 73 per cent received economic support of various kind from children (China Research Centre on Ageing, 1994). In 1996 the China Research Centre on Ageing and the University of Michigan Population Studies Centre launched a joint project in Baoding, Hebei as an extension of the Comparative Studies on Support Systems for the Aged in Asia.

Since the major concern of this study is family support in rural China, studies that focus on urban elderly are not reviewed in details here, although many of them produced valuable findings for comparison, such as Liang, Gu and Krause' study in Wuhan (1992) and Whyte's work in Baoding (1997). Evidence from rural areas ^{does not} differs ~~not~~ remarkably from the national pattern. A 1986 survey of 33 villages outside Beijing, for example, reported that 78 per cent of the aged did not live on their own resources, and that 67 per cent had to rely on their children to meet their basic needs (Yuan, Wang and Song, 1992). A village survey in Zhejiang found that 86 per cent of the aged lived with one of their children and were supported by them (Goldstein, Ku and Ikels, 1990). A survey in rural

Hebei in 1987 reported that 57 per cent of those over 60 relied on others, and 44 per cent stated that they had no control over the spending of family income (Davis-Friedmann 1991). A 1987 survey in Yanqing indicates further that responsibility for family support of older parents did not necessarily fall entirely on the eldest child. Parents' choice of co-residence was usually influenced by the way in which family properties are shared. It was the youngest son who was most likely to live with his parents (Yuan, Wang and Song, 1992). The general impression is that the family is the main source of support and care for the current rural elderly. Filial piety is still alive and well, and the old continue to play a central role in the household economy. The general consequence of reforms for the rural aged is a decline in self-sufficiency but no obvious or pervasive loss of security.

Goldstein and Ku (1993) argued that aggregated information showing the percentage of old people living with sons tells little about who is in control in these households and how the elderly are treated. From an in-depth anthropological study of the aged in two villages in Yuyao, they found that the situation diverged markedly from the traditional pattern of family support. The old people's income derived primarily from their own work and only secondly from children. Daughters' contribution was as important as that of sons. More than half (52 per cent) of the aged lived in single-generation households, either alone, or with a spouse, or in 'by turn' arrangements. Those who lived with married sons had limited access to the household's cash income. Therefore, the ideal extended family was not necessarily a sign of economic well-being or good treatment, and having more living sons did not result in receiving more income or support. The aged were aware of this and 61 per cent responded that they were in favour of having only one son. The authors conclude that family support was still very important, despite the old people's feeling that there has been a decline in support and respect from children. The family provided income and assistance to parents throughout old age and also acted as final security for the aged when they became unable to survive on their own.

1.5. Rationale and conceptual framework

The studies mentioned above have offered rich insights into the status of the elderly and family support in rural China. However, more detailed information on old-age security is still lacking about the differences between males and females, young-old and old-old, healthy and frail, and those with and without sons. Most studies examined the living conditions of the aged, but failed to identify the key factors that influence their economic well-being. Most studies focused on the present cohorts of the aged whose security situation is quite favourable because they already have a larger number of living children to rely upon. Left out are those cohorts now in their adult years who have fewer children to count on for assistance in old age. Little is known about their attitudes, expectations and strategies toward their own old-age security in response to the current low level of fertility and radical social and economic changes.

The response and adjustment of younger generations to the current low fertility level are of special significance for the success of family planning programs. Numerous studies on fertility determinants in developing countries find that old-age support considerations exercise a strong influence in favour of high fertility. *Yang er fang lao* (rearing children for old-age security) is also a primary motive in traditional Chinese society for having large families. Since the rapid fertility decline in China is to a certain extent policy-induced, it is not certain whether the present low level will be sustained, or whether there will be a rebound. Therefore, family planning is still a long-term and difficult task. In China, the current young adult cohorts are unique in history for several reasons. First, the total number of this generation is the largest, constituting the base of the last high-fertility age pyramid. Second, this is also the first generation whose fertility behaviour has been directly influenced or manipulated by government birth control policies. Therefore, the number of children on whom they can rely for their own old age is very small. Third, people of this generation, now in their prime ages, are the backbone of their own families as well as the society as a whole. Their ideas, values and conduct will have extensive effects not only for the moment but also in years to come. If they

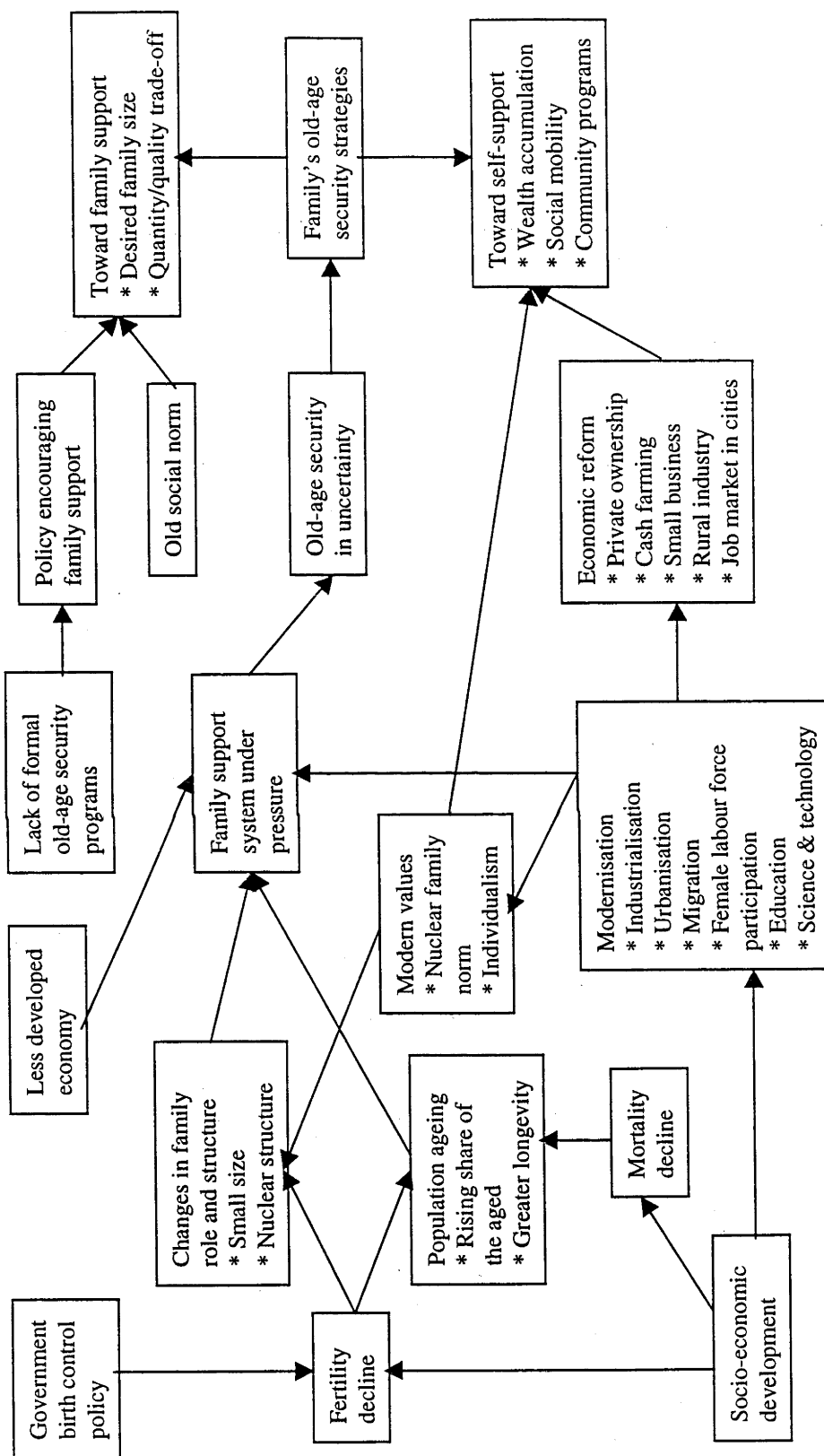
have eventually accepted the idea of family planning and, hence, readjusted their strategies so that their own old-age security is separated from having large families, the government goal of population control will be achieved in a much easier and smoother way.

In this context, this study will provide relevant programs with an empirical understanding of the effect of rapid fertility decline on the pattern of old-age support, as well as rural couples' strategies for adapting to the current low fertility level. Such understandings may be used in the future to design family-oriented old-age assistance programs in rural areas or to tailor family planning programs to meet rural people's needs. Beyond that, the findings may also be compared with those from other developing countries that are confronted with similar challenges.

Most previous studies on family support for the elderly in developing countries are empirical. Few have extended further to examine the old-age security strategies of young adults in the face of swift demographic, social and economic changes. A theoretical framework for analysis is yet to be fully established. Figure 1.2 shows a path diagram presenting the major conceptual links at macro level between fertility decline, socio-economic development, population ageing, the family old-age support system, and assumptions of families old-age security strategies.

1. According to the classical theory of demographic transition, both the mortality and fertility of a population will decline from high to low levels as a result of socio-economic development. A significant by-product of the demographic transition at the late phase is the ageing of the population and the extension of life. Recent experiences in developing countries show that lower mortality and fertility can be achieved without substantial improvements in socio-economic conditions, and fertility decline, not increased life expectancy, plays the initial major role in population ageing (Jones, 1993). It is particularly true in China that the current low level of fertility is achieved primarily through massive, and sometimes coercive, family planning programs.

Figure 1.2. Path diagram presenting the conceptual links between fertility decline, socio-economic development, population ageing, the family old-age support system, and assumptions of family's old-age security strategies



2. Fertility decline contributes not only to population ageing, but also to changes in family structure, leading to ever-shrinking family size.

3. Modernisation is a global phenomenon characterised by increased industrialisation, urbanisation, migration, female labour force participation, and progress in education and science and technology. In developing countries, modernisation is almost a synonym for Westernisation. Western values that favour individualism and small family also have an effect on changes in family structure. The nuclear family is replacing the traditional extended family to become the prevailing norm.

4. In industrialised countries, the source of old-age security for the elderly has principally shifted from the family support system to the public support system. However, in less developed regions like rural China, such a formal old-age security program is largely non-existent. 5. Without public assistance, the traditional system of family support is under severe pressure to cope with the situation.

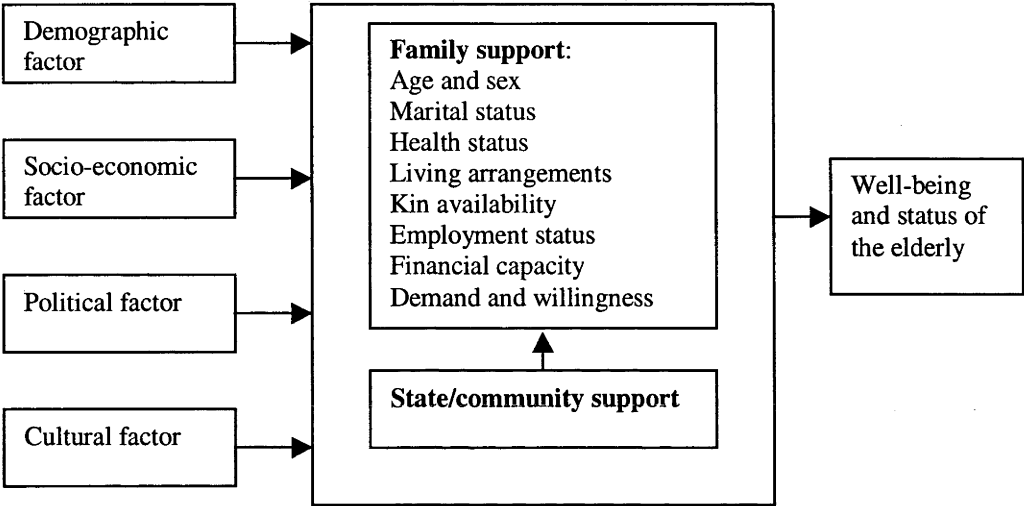
6. The economic security of the elderly becomes increasingly uncertain during this period of demographic and socio-economic changes. Generally speaking, the present cohorts of the aged are in a favourable position because they already have a larger number of living children to rely upon. (Of course, the number of children is not the only contributing factor to old-age security). However, the young adults whose fertility behaviour is controlled by government policies must face the uncertainty of their own security in old age, and adjust their own strategies for the future.

7. Certain people continue to expect their children to provide old-age support, given the strong encouragement from the Government and the existing old social norm. Some might take the risk of violating government regulations at any price to achieve their desired family size. Others might choose a trade-off of quantity for quality by investment in education to bring up one or two successful children who will have adequate means of support in future.

8. Uncertain about children's willingness, availability or ability to provide, certain people intend to ensure their own old-age security in advance by taking advantage of recent market-oriented reforms through measures like wealth accumulation, social mobility and participating in community old-age insurance programs.

Figure 1.3 presents an analytical framework for assessing the likelihood and extent of family support for the elderly in China in general, and the study area in particular, based largely on the assumptions of McDonald (1989) and Mason (1992). At macro level, there are four major factors: the demographic factor as shown in the trend of population ageing as a whole, the socio-economic factor as shown in the large-scale social engineering programs over the last few decades, the political factor as shown in state policies and government sponsored programs, and the cultural factor as shown in the influence of traditional Confucian values and norms. The effect of these macro factors on the economic well-being and social status of the elderly can only be materialised through the mechanism of the existing system of family support. At the intermediate level, there are also a number of factors that will affect the outcome of family support: age and sex, marital status, health status, living arrangements, kin availability, employment status, financial capacity, demand for and willingness to provide support. In most cases, these factors involve an intergenerational relationship between the elderly and other young adult family members. Under current circumstances, state and/or community support for the elderly only plays a limited role in rural China.

Figure 1.3: Analytical framework for assessing the likelihood and extent of family support for the elderly



1.6. Organisation of the thesis

Chapter 2 explains the methodological perspectives of this study. In order to attaining the proposed objects within limited time and budget, an integrated approach, the so-called micro-demographic community-study approach is employed, that combines a formal, structured survey operation with a number of intensive quantitative techniques. A household survey was conducted to cover a larger area to identify general patterns and trends, while observation, personal interview and focus-group discussion were used to inquire about attitudes, opinions and behaviours.

Chapter 3 presents the study area of Pingling Township and Nanshangzhao village with a detailed description of the location, size, facilities available and the socio-economic history and structure. Efforts are made to explain the drastic social and economic changes over the last few decades as results of various social engineering

experiments imposed by the government.

Chapter 4 illustrates the economic well-being and social status of the rural elderly, after a brief review of the relationship between modernisation and the status of the elderly. The economic well-being of the elderly is discussed in comparison between the past during the commune period and the present, and between the elderly and younger generations, while the social status is discussed in terms of household headship and the role in household decision-making. Special attention is paid to the elderly's influence in children's marriage arrangements.

Chapter 5 investigates the family support received by the rural elderly, with a special emphasis on economic support. Family support is examined in terms of living arrangements, kin availability, and the form and level of economic support. A number of case studies are presented as vivid examples how the elderly coped with different family situations. Two other factors relevant to the likelihood and extent of family support in the context of rural China are discussed in further details: the willingness of children to provide support and the legislation and policies that require children to fulfil their support obligations.

Chapter 6 addresses the attitude towards and strategy of old-age security among working age villagers in the study area, starting from a brief review of the old-age security-fertility hypothesis. Discussions are divided into three major issues: the expected living arrangements in terms of ideal family size and ideal family structure, attitude towards coresidence, and desired forms of economic support in old age.

Chapter 7 sums up the major findings of this study, and in conclusion explores implications for policy-making in four areas: demographic, socio-cultural, socio-economic and political. A brief discussion is devoted to questions for future research.

CHAPTER 2

METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES OF THE STUDY

2.1. Research methods and research design: an integrated approach

Social research is considered as a systematic process where various methods are used for information collection, classification and analysis, in order to achieve the planned objectives of a research project. Thanks to the previous efforts of numerous scientists and scholars, a great variety of research methods are now available to choose from by researchers according to their specific objectives. Qualitative and quantitative approaches are the two major forms of social research (Boonchalaksi, 1990).

Generally speaking, the processes used in qualitative and quantitative studies are initially quite similar, from problem selection, objective setting, theoretical framework construction, research design, data collection, analysis to report writing. The major difference lies in the techniques used for data collection and analysis. While the quantitative approach focuses primarily on objective numerical data collected by systematically based methods like censuses and surveys, the qualitative approach emphasises detailed, descriptive, and usually subjective data gathered by non-systematically based methods such as observations, researcher participation, group discussions, and in-depth interviewing. In fact, the two approaches are often employed in combination so that they can complement each other. Quantitative methods like conventional surveys are able to cover larger areas in a shorter period, making it possible to identify a general phenomenon not confined to a single locality. However, it is considered inappropriate to measure certain attitudes, opinions and behaviours that are ambiguous and unquantifiable by nature. As Mitchel (1983) states, quantitative analysis also has difficulty in studying relationships and their effect on people involved. On the other hand, field data gathered by qualitative methods are occasionally questioned for their reliability and validity. Therefore, it is important not only to maintain a high degree of consistency in data collection, but also to employ multiple methods to cross-check the

reliability and validity of the data gathered. In this context, qualitative analysis is helpful for achieving better interpretation of statistical tables, while quantitative analysis is useful for verifying descriptive data.

Understandably, the selection of an appropriate method should be determined by the research question rather than the mere availability of standard techniques and procedures. As mentioned in the previous chapter, this study examines the economic security of the elderly and its relation to family support in rural China. Because of time and financial constraints, the study is confined to a village and its surrounding areas in central Shaanxi. In order to acquire in-depth understanding of the question in discussion, it was decided to take an integrated approach, the so-called micro-demographic community-study approach, which is considered useful for studies of social and family change in community settings (Axinn, Fricke and Thornton, 1991). This integrated approach usually combines a formal, structured survey operation with a number of intensive quantitative techniques.

At village level, three forms of qualitative technique for information collection were used: direct observation, focus discussion and in-depth interview. Personal observation notes and tape recorder transcripts were categorised, classified and analysed. A survey was conducted in a broader area at township level. A household questionnaire, consisting mainly of close-ended questions, was designed for collecting information about the old people's living arrangements, economic well-being and financial support. The raw data are then put into a databank for computerised analysis with MS Excel and SPSS at a later stage. The first step is univariate analysis, to obtain information about the frequency and distribution of selected variables, such as respondents' demographic and socio-economic characteristics. The next step is bivariate analysis, to assess the relationship between selected variables, including the direction (positive or negative) and magnitude (weak, moderate, strong). The survey results are compared with findings from the information gathered through qualitative techniques. Secondary data about the socio-

economic development and family planning programs are collected from government officials, village heads and program workers.

2.2. Source of data

2.2.1. Household survey

As in most social science studies, conducting sample surveys is still a standard method of data collection in demographic research. This method is indispensable because of its great strength in that surveys can cover a comparatively large population to discover trends and patterns, particularly when relationships between variables are in discussion. Surveys can also help achieve objectives in a less time-consuming and more cost-effective way, thanks to recent development in computerised analysis techniques. However, because of the special consideration of statistical significance, there are usually requirements for sample size and sampling procedure satisfying certain criteria.

Most field work of this study was carried out in a village, primarily through a number of qualitative techniques. To capture more information from a broader area, nevertheless, it was still considered necessary and, not the least, feasible to conduct a sample survey at township level. Based on survey manuals of previous studies conducted in rural China, a household questionnaire was first drafted before the field work. Samples were set to be selected from households with living elderly parents aged 60 and over, no matter whether the elderly are co-resident or non-resident. As mentioned in the previous chapter, studies on the aged population in China usually take 60 years as the cut-off age for the elderly, such as the 1987 National Survey on Aged Population.

The questionnaire consists of three main components. The first module collects information about all members in the household, including demographic and socio-economic characteristics, living arrangements and contributions to providing for the elderly. It is divided further into two parts. One collects the general information of all co-

resident members of the household, and the other collects that of all non-resident members of the family. Only immediate family members are involved in the non-resident category, such as siblings, parents or children. For each of the co-resident members, questions are asked about their relationship to the household head, sex, age, marital status, education, employment status (occupation), role in economic support for the elderly, role in physical assistance to the elderly, and role in major decision making of household economy. For each of the non-resident members, questions are asked about the relationship to the informant, sex, age, marital status, employment status, current residence, living arrangements, frequency of visits, and economic relations. The second module focuses on economic conditions of the household, including income, source of income, expenditure, and sum and areas used to provide for the elderly. The third module is concerned about old-age support expectations, including preferred family size and structure, preferred living arrangements and preferred forms of old-age support (Appendix 1).

Questions, or variables, in each module are selected with special care so that they are not only compatible to the requirements of research objectives but also consistent with the reality of rural Shaanxi. For example, questions about villagers' ethnic identity and religious belief are omitted. At national level, these two variables may be of great relevance to the topic in discussion, but they are not readily applicable in the study village where residents are 100 per cent Han Chinese and do not follow any religions recognised by the government¹. The categories used in major variables are basically identical to official publications, such as the 1990 National Census, so that survey results could be comparable with the findings of other studies. For example, the level of education is divided into five categories according to China's formal schooling system: illiterate, primary school, junior high school, senior high school and college. Classifying a person as illiterate does not necessarily mean that he can neither read nor write at all. It only indicates in this study that he has not finished formal primary education. However, semi-

¹ In China there are 56 officially identified ethnic groups, with the Han Chinese being the majority (92 per cent according to the 1990 National Census). The five officially recognised religions are Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, Catholic and Protestant churches.

literate should not be confused with fully illiterate. Some basic knowledge in reading and writing can make a big difference in a person's everyday life.

Data entry on the spot has been treated differently according to the nature of information. Some interval data, such as age, are recorded as they are during the interview, so that they can be regrouped repeatedly for different analytical purposes at later stages. On the other hand, some interval data are divided into a few ordinal categories. For example, household income is divided into four levels: poor (per head monthly income lower than 50 *Yuan*), average (50-99 *Yuan*), well-to-do (100-199 *Yuan*) and wealthy (200 *Yuan* and over). The range of average income level is based on the fact that the per head monthly income in the study township, Pingling, was about 85 *Yuan* in 1995, the year before the survey. In previous literature, particularly that from industrialised countries, personal monetary income is often used as a major indicator to assess the economic status and well-being of the aged. However, this indicator alone is inadequate in the context of rural China. At present most rural people are not engaged in wage employment, and rural families commonly do not keep a strict financial account. It is easier for the respondents to choose an income level roughly accordant with their actual situation, rather than to laboriously make up a number that is not necessarily accurate. For questions mainly concerning people's knowledge or attitude, simple yes-or-no answers will do; these are classified as dummy variables for later analysis.

Considering the fact that the survey was conducted in a rural environment where the elderly are likely to be illiterate, it was decided to make the questions as simple and easily understood as possible. Most questions are close-ended, and can be answered by ticking from a list of multiple choices. Therefore, it is important what answers can be chosen for the list. Originally, the 1987 Survey of the CASS Population Institute was taken as a reference. After the first visit to the study village for pre-test, it was found that some of the answers do not readily apply to local conditions. Certain modifications were later made accordingly on the questionnaire. For example, the occupation category of the original version included employment in collectively owned rural enterprises (also referred

to as township enterprises), which has played an essential part in revitalising the rural economy in China in recent years. In some provinces the majority of non-agricultural workers in rural areas are employed by rural enterprises run by local township or village governments. However, in Pingling there were also a number of privately owned small enterprises, such as construction companies and motor vehicle repair shops. As a result, the category of rural industry includes both the collectively owned and the privately owned. Another example concerns old-age insurance programs. It is understood that currently only a limited number of rural communities have their own old-age pension programs. Nevertheless, there are common welfare programs that do have old-age support implications, such as the two-daughter insurance programs designed to provide some financial security for permanent contraceptive users with two daughters. The original questionnaire has taken into account such common insurance programs. From a visit to the study village, it was found out, surprisingly, that commercial insurance companies have already extended their business down to the village level. As part of their life insurance policies, the commercial old-age insurance program has been vigorously promoted. Therefore, commercial programs have also been included as an old-age support option in the revised questionnaire.

Although the pre-test of the questionnaire could be done by myself personally, it was impossible for me to finish all the interviews in a short period without the help of other interviewers. As discussed above, the questionnaire used for the survey is short and simple. To be qualified for the task, an interviewer should at least be literate and able to work independently. Understanding local conditions and local dialect are of course an advantage. It is certainly possible nowadays to recruit interviewers from local residents, because most young adults in rural areas are primary or high school graduates, especially in the study area where the formal education system is well established. However, they are not necessarily available at the time of survey because of other obligations. Also recruiting people from one village to another is time-consuming. From my previous experience, I decided that students of local high schools are the most suitable people for this purpose in rural Shaanxi. Compared with other rural residents, high school students usually have

sufficient education, are familiar with classroom training and obedient to supervisors, come from a wide area to a relatively concentrated place, and bear few family or social responsibilities while studying. The only drawback of high school students is that they may have little specific knowledge and experience, and they are not mature or flexible enough to deal with unexpected situations. I believe, however, such problems can be overcome by systematic training and supervision during the field work.

The household survey of this study was conducted in the last two weeks of May 1996, and interviewers were trained from students of the Pingling High School. Under the current education system in rural Shaanxi, each village has its own primary school, but each township has only one high school. The school is located in the township site of Pingling, about 15 kilometres to the west of the study village of Nanshangzhao. At the time of the survey, the school consisted of 12 classes in three grades, with a total of 580 students. Most of the students come from the 18 villages within the township's jurisdiction, ideal for the planned survey to cover the whole township.

Through the introduction of Mr. Liu Qingming, the head of the Villagers' Committee and a former graduate of the Pingling High School, I met first with Mr. Liu Lixin, the school principal, and talked about my plan in his office. Mr. Liu was quite happy to assist, but was a little worried about the timing of the survey, because the students were busy preparing for a mid-term examination before the school closed for two weeks during the wheat harvest season in the early June. After I explained the schedule and promised that the students' work would be compensated financially, Mr. Liu approved the program and referred me further to teachers-in-charge of two classes in Grade III, Mr. Fan Genyun and Ms. Zhang Ping. My meeting with Mr. Fan and Ms. Zhang turned out to be quite friendly and informal. I discussed with them my plan and schedule in detail, with a special emphasis on the questionnaire, and expected to hear their suggestions. Both teachers were confident that their students could do a good job to satisfy my requirements. Considering the total number of students in their classes and the financial budget at my disposal, we decided to distribute 300 questionnaires to about 60 students, with each visiting five

households. The interviewers would be selected first on a voluntary basis, but efforts should be made that they represented as many villages as possible (some students were from neighbouring townships).

While I was busy getting the questionnaires printed on time, the two teachers finished the list of students willing to offer help in the household survey. The school took one class off for me to give a short training course to the student volunteers. Both the teachers-in-charge were also present to answer questions. Students were asked to select their interview households randomly in their home village according to the requirements, and those from the same village should make sure that no household would be visited twice. Interviews could be carried out within one week either after school or during the weekend. Each of us, the two teachers and I, chose one village to supervise the whole procedure. Questions arising from the interview in other villages were answered the next day at school, and students were requested to repeat the interview if possible. In the end, a total of 284 questionnaires were completed. Coding and data entry were finished in Beijing with the assistance of my colleagues in the Research Institute of Economics.

Table 2.1: Distribution of sample population by selected characteristics, Pingling Township, mid-1996

Item	Percentage (%)	No.
A. Sex		
Males	49.1	588
Females	50.9	610
B. Age group		
0-17	29.6	355
18-59	52.5	629
60+	17.9	214
C. Household structure		
Single-generation	5.3	64
Two-generation	43.7	524
Three-generation	45.5	545
Four-generation	5.4	65
Total	100.0	1,198

Source: Survey data collected by the author during the field work.

From the 284 questionnaires, information about a total of 1,198 people was collected. As displayed in Table 2.1, 49.1 per cent of the sample population were males, and 50.9 per cent were females. Children and teenagers (0-17) accounted for 29.6 per cent, while the adults in working ages (18-59) for 52.5 per cent. At 17.9 per cent, the proportion of the elderly aged 60 and over was slightly higher than the district average of 9.4 per cent, because the survey only covered families with living elderly parents. The majority of the villagers lived in two-generation (43.7 per cent) and three-generation households (45.5 per cent). People lived in one-generation and four-generation households were almost the same in number, 64 and 65 respectively.

Generally speaking, that the survey could be carried out relatively smoothly can be attributed to a number of factors. First, the sample size is small and the questionnaire is relatively concise and simple. Problems in management and quality control have thus been minimised. Second, the co-operation and support of the school authority was essential. The students as interviewers were devout and careful because the survey itself was seen as a sort of assignment handed down by teachers. Third, the students were more likely to visit relatives or close neighbours in their home village. The students had a better understanding of the households visited, and direct access to them; and people being interviewed were co-operative and ready to help a student finish his assignment, a practice still highly valued in the village. And finally, certain financial compensations also played a role in keeping both interviewers and respondents happy.

2.2.2. Direct observation and in-depth interview

To obtain more in-depth information about the topic in discussion, as mentioned above, the household survey was associated with a number of qualitative techniques. Observation is one of the most frequently used techniques for qualitative studies, since it allows the researcher to gather first-hand information about individual and group behaviour through direct interaction with the target population in their own community. In practice, observation can be divided into two forms: structured and unstructured observation (Boonchalaksi, 1990). The former involves the selection and recording of the

major events in their natural setting according a pre-arranged plan, while the latter is more flexible for collecting more information that cannot be identified if the questions are framed beforehand. Understandably, most researchers use both observation approaches while collecting primary information in the field.

Observation as a research technique has its strengths and weaknesses. It is a very simple and natural method for gathering information. The researcher can continue his study without disturbing respondents' daily routines. The researcher usually has control of his own schedule, independent of others' co-operation. Possible reporting errors can thus be avoided as well. On the other hand, there are still a number of drawbacks. Information collected from an individual or a small group of people is not necessarily representative enough. It is prone to distortion because of the researcher's personal bias, lack of knowledge about the context, or 'artificial behaviour' of respondents. Sometimes direct observation can be obtrusive when respondents think it is an intrusion into their privacy and freedom, particularly when no understanding has been agreed upon in advance. Therefore, sufficient knowledge of the study area, an unbiased attitude and good relations with the local population are preconditions for achieving fruitful results by observation. Information collected through other sources can also be used to verify the reliability and validity of observation data.

Unlike the sample survey, observation requires more intensive interaction between the researcher and respondents. To live in the community for a period is a practical way for the researcher to develop such close relations with villagers. In the study village of Nanshangzhao, I proposed to Mr. Liu Qingming, the head of the Villagers' Committee, during our first meeting that I would like to live with a village family for about three weeks for my study. I was then introduced to the young couple Mr. Liu Jianhai and Ms. Bian Mingxia. Mr. Liu works as a part-time construction worker for a small private construction company in the village, and Ms. Bian is the only family planning worker in the village. The Liu family has two boys and lives in a courtyard with two houses, a new

one with a living room and two bedrooms and an old one with a large storage area and a kitchen. The Lius were very happy to have me as a guest.

For the purpose of direct observation, I would say that the village head's choice of the Liu family for me to stay with was ideal. The young couple are both high school graduates and have frequent contacts with people from outside the village, particularly officials from the local government. Without any problems of communication between us, I could get my intentions understood and requirements fulfilled quickly. More importantly, I could readjust the schedule of my field work according to their valuable suggestions. Although the Liu family is a nuclear one with no co-resident elderly parents, I was still able to collect information on old-age support in the village with the help of two persons: Mr. Liu's father, Old Liu, and Mr. Liu's wife, Ms. Bian.

Liu's parents live with his older brother's family just across the street in the same village. The young couple and their children often have dinner with Mr. Liu's parents in their house. In these cases I was also invited. In the day time when the young Lius were busy with their jobs, I usually went across the street to visit Liu's parents. Sometimes I sat chatting with the old man, and sometime I helped the old woman finish household work. Old Liu is a quite influential personality in the village, because he used to be in charge of water distribution at the village pumping station. In an area where most farming land depends on water from the nearby irrigation channel, the importance of Old Liu's position is obvious. Now that he is retired, there are still a lot of old friends dropping in if he is at home, particularly after dinner. The old people did not mind that I was present, because I was introduced as Junior Liu's friend. It was a pleasure to mix with these old villagers and listen to their stories; at the same time, I could also ask questions relevant to my study.

As mentioned above, Ms. Bian is the only family planning worker in the village, appointed by the township government. Apart from the village head, Ms. Bian perhaps has the easiest access to village families, because her job has made her familiar to all housewives. Ms. Bian keeps a contraceptive use record of all village women in

reproductive ages, and one of her major responsibilities is to visit these women regularly and provide counselling and support. During my stay in the village, Ms. Bian was updating her record as instructed by the township government to find out if all contraceptive users had their bi-monthly check-up done properly. While visiting from one family to another, Ms. Bian took me as company, so that I could have a chance to meet the family heads. Based on the preliminary information collected in this way, I selected a few families for case study according to the living arrangements of the elderly. As I became acquainted with villagers later on, I could wander freely in the village and started to visit one by one the families on the list.

Through direct observation, I expected to obtain a general understanding of the environment of the rural old people. Village life usually differs markedly from urban life. At a time when drastic changes are taking place all over the country, my previous experience from a decade ago is obviously not sufficient to grasp the main theme of rural living in contemporary China. For the current study on old-age support, I am especially concerned about rural development and village managements, people's living standard and consumption patterns as reflected in housing, food, clothing and household appliances, the old people's social, economic and health status compared with younger generations, daily routines of the elderly in various groups by age, sex, living arrangements and living standard, and the roles of different family members in relation to household economy and management in general, and to old-age support in particular. Since these purposes were set during the stage of research design, the observation to be conducted can be seen as a structured one with a pre-arranged plan. However, unexpected events may occur in such community studies, as the definition of unstructured observation suggests. During my stay in Nanshangzhao, I was lucky enough to witness two quite unusual events relevant to the current study: one was a lavish marriage ceremony, and the other was a grand ritual at the three-year anniversary of the death of an elderly family head. Both events gave me a rare opportunity to examine how the traditional values survive and the elderly are treated nowadays in rural China.

Direct observation as a data collection technique in this study was further supplemented by in-depth interviews. In the literature, there are three types of interviews used in qualitative studies. The informal conversational interview refers to the situation when no presupposition is taken about what can be learnt by talking to the people under study. It is flexible to cover as many answers as possible. The general interview guide approach has some basic guidelines, so that the researcher can have a certain control of the direction and scope of the conversation. The standardised open-ended interview is used mainly in group situations, to save time and minimise biases. Generally speaking, the in-depth interview is less structured than other qualitative techniques, and is frequently used for a more intensive study of knowledge, attitudes and motivations among people who are relevant to the research objectives. Compared with other standardised approaches, the response to such informal conversational interviews is more spontaneous, specific and self-revealing.

In the study village, in-depth interviews were carried out during family visits. I realised that the best time for family visits was day-time when people at home were more likely to be the elderly. Young adults usually went to work in the fields and children were at school. While still able to continue the observation task, I made full use of these visits for intensive interviews to collect information about the old people's life history, assessment of their status at home and in the community, their experience of old-age support, and their problems and expectations. Day-time visiting has a number of advantages. The elderly, free from most productive obligations, have plenty of time for prolonged interviews. There is no need to rush because conversations can be carried out even if the elderly are engaged in household jobs. They themselves feel more relaxed to talk about things directly related to their well-being, without worrying about disturbance or interruption by other family members. It is always possible to check with other family members at a later stage about some facts, such as details of household finance, if the old people find it difficult to offer a clear answer.

Although I was introduced to most villagers by Ms. Bian during our family visits at the earlier stage of my stay in the village, it still took two or three follow-up visits to the families I selected for in-depth interview for me to come close to the topics that really interested me. More often it was elderly males in the family who talked to me, while elderly women sat near and listened, only to join in occasionally. This is not surprising, as old women in rural areas are still not used to talking openly with outsiders. To get acquainted with the elderly, I usually started the conversation with some indirect questions. For example, as I found out, old men were willing to respond to questions about local history, and some even became very excited while explaining minor details². It is quite natural in a region with a long history and rich heritage. The nearby city of Xianyang has been the capital of a number of powerful dynasties in Chinese history, and the township, Pingling, is named after the mausoleum of a Han emperor, located just five kilometres to the west of the village. From village history it was natural to move to the history of the old people's own life. When I spoke to old women, I tried to start the conversation with a few positive comments on the children playing around. In response, it seems that old women can talk for ages, with great passion, about their loved grandchildren. With little difficulty I could then move further to ask questions about their own children. Of course, there were also exceptions. For example, in a family where the old man is partly paralysed and bedridden, the old woman answered most of my questions. According to Chinese custom, a small present always works to bridge differences, show respect or express gratitude. Therefore, another tactic for me to foster a better relationship with the families was to bring some small gifts for the old people to whom I talked. For old men I prepared tea and cigarettes that are favoured by rural old people for personal consumption. Usually, the conversation began with the origin and the taste of the tea, or the brand of the cigarettes. For old women I brought some sweets that they could further distribute to the children later on.

² I was given by a retired school teacher a long lecture why the official name of Nanshangzhao carved on the stone tablet in front of the village office is incorrect. The current character Zhao (shining) should be Zhao (clearing), according to historical records.

2.2.3. Focus-group discussion

The focus-group discussion is another qualitative technique frequently used in social science studies, although it was developed originally for market research. The focus group technique is concerned primarily with the opinions, attitudes, beliefs and norms of a group rather than an individual, and the information gathered is not necessarily as statistically generalisable as survey results. Therefore, it is best viewed as a complement to other quantitative and qualitative research techniques. No matter what technique is used, the results can always be compared with each other.

A focus-group session is an interview where a small group of people is guided by a moderator to discuss freely and spontaneously a topic relevant to the research objectives. The term 'focus' is used because the topic or concept being discussed is narrowly focused; in this way, in-depth discussions are allowed to develop. The selection of participants is also focused by targeting individuals who meet specific criteria. Usually more than one group session is held, using different members, to achieve adequate coverage. Alternatively, sessions can be refined by selecting specific subgroups within a population for comparative analysis. For the sake of a free-flowing discussion, it is desirable that the participants for a given session come from a similar background or share a common perception of the problem under investigation. Otherwise, people with different characteristics may not feel at ease sitting side by side, or conflicting opinions may lead to counterproductive arguments or quarrels. In addition, a successful session depends on whether the interview guideline is well structured and the moderator well trained.

Unlike the situation in individual in-depth interviews, group dynamics is an important feature of focus-group sessions in which interactions among participants stimulate further discussion, with one reacting to remarks made by another. Another obvious benefit of the technique is that it is both time-saving and cost-effective. However, it has been argued that focus-group sessions by their very nature are not very useful in

obtaining information considered private or about behaviour that might be looked down upon by others (Vong-Ek, 1990). Also there is the requirement for the moderator to be as neutral as possible, because the way he directs questions may influence how people answer.

In recent years, the focus group technique has been frequently used in studies on the topic of ageing in developing countries (Knodel, Sittitrai and Brown, 1990; Pramualratana, 1990). A typical focus-group study can be divided into three main stages: designing, implementing, and data processing and analysis. Steps in the first stage include drafting a guideline, targeting the participants and working out a schedule. In the guideline used in this study (Appendix 2), there are five groups of questions: the role and status of the elderly, living arrangements of the elderly, the experience of old-age support, economic activities of the elderly, expectations and strategies for economic security in old age. Some questions can also be found in the questionnaire designed for the household survey, such as living arrangements. The information gathered from focus-group discussions can be used to verify the general pattern revealed in survey results. Other questions are only valid for focus-group discussions, such as the meaning of old or villagers' old-age securities. It is hard for a close-ended questionnaire to capture all the possible answers, even with multiple choices. Therefore, as the term 'guideline' suggests, such questions should be very flexible to initiate discussions. I kept the questions relatively flexible also because I myself was going to organise and direct the discussion. If necessary, I could easily add new questions or by-pass unsuitable ones.

Targeting the participants is considered critical to the success of focus-group studies. As mentioned above, for different sessions participants should be selected from different backgrounds, and for each session they should be as homogeneous as possible. Certainly, the choice of a particular criterion depends on the topics under investigation. In studies on the support system for the elderly, Knodel, Sittitrai and Brown (1990) have suggested a number of criteria to break down focus groups, such as life-cycle stage, socio-economic status, rural or urban residence, and marital status. Because of time and financial constraints, I used only two sets of characteristics: age (old people, adult children) and

sex. Together four different participant subgroups were defined for separate discussion sessions: old men, old women, young men and young women. Also taken into consideration were another two control variables: residence and marital status. All participants were rural residents and married (or widowed).

Focus-group sessions were held in mid-May in the study village. During my first round of family visits with Ms. Bian, I made a list of people who volunteered to participate in the proposed group discussions. Of the 32 would-be participants on my list, 27 persons eventually turned up for the discussions. The participants were given advance notice about the time and venue (a small meeting room in conjunction to the village office), but a boy was still hired to remind them to come to the session on schedule. The sessions generally started at around 10 o'clock in the morning, and lasted about two hours. As in the household survey, each participant was paid a small sum after the session as compensation for lost income. The money was certainly not much, it at least proved my sincere gratitude for their help. As the word went around after the first session, participants in the subsequent sessions were quite happy to arrive on time.

I myself acted as the moderator in all four sessions, although theoretically an independent moderator might be ideal. During the discussion I made efforts not to be biased, and adjusted the guidelines slightly to characteristics of the participants. For example, more emphasis was given to the experience of old-age support in the elderly groups, while in the young adult groups importance was given to expectations. All the discussions were recorded on tapes for later transcripts. General speaking, the flow of discussion was quite smooth, and the result was satisfactory. My impression is that young people were more active than the old, males talked more than females, and people with education touched upon broader issues than the illiterate. Nevertheless, I found the session with old women somewhat difficult, although I had asked Ms. Bian to attend both women's sessions to assist in communicating with female participants. Old women seemed very shy and needed a lot of encouragement and explanation to give an answer. Unlike other sessions, there was little group dynamic, making a group discussion session look more like a group interview. This disappointment may be attributed to two factors:

perhaps rural old women are still unable to fully develop personal ideas because of their disadvantaged position at home and in the community; or perhaps they are not used to talking openly about their personal opinions in a formal environment, particularly on topics when family issues are involved. At present, personal interviews may be a more appropriate way of collecting information from the elderly women in rural areas.

2.2.4. Secondary data

As mentioned in Chapter I, one of this study's objectives was to examine the effect on old-age support of two drastic policies introduced by the Government in rural areas over the last two decades: private farming and family planning. For a better understanding of the implementation of these two policies in the study area, two kinds of secondary data have been used. Statistics of socio-economic development came mainly from visits to government offices, and village data were acquired from the village head and the village accountant. If applicable, the reference period is 1995, the year before the field work. Family planning data were gathered mainly from the family planning records kept by Ms. Bian, the village program worker. Ms. Bian is assigned by the township government to promote family planning in the village of Nanshangzhao. One of her responsibilities is to keep a record card of contraceptive use for every married woman in reproductive ages (up to 40). The card is composed of four panels: information on the wife and the husband, information on all living children, records of contraceptive use, and records of pregnancies and births. From these records, it is easy to describe family planning programs and fertility changes in a rural community in recent years.

2.3. Summary remarks

Research design and the choice of methodology should be compatible with the question under investigation. Because of time and financial constraints, this study on old-age support is confined to a rural community. Accordingly, I used an integrated approach combining both quantitative and qualitative techniques in data collection and analysis. The

two techniques are expected to be mutually complementary to produce satisfactory results.

During the field work, efforts were made to ensure that the data collected are valid and reliable. In addition to general technical considerations, three issues deserve special attention in the course of data collection. First, China is by and large still an authoritarian state, and the Government has firm control over the society, in spite of the recent decentralisation reform in rural areas. Therefore, approval from local officials is essential for an outsider to conduct fieldwork in their jurisdiction. For example, necessary papers should be arranged in advance. Second, although the Villagers' Committee is not a government body and the committee members are elected by fellow villagers, the village head is still an influential figure; his cooperation and assistance are desirable. Schedule permitting, his advice should be taken into serious account. For the first home visits, it is polite, and also productive, to take a local resident as company. Third, as the market-oriented reform gradually penetrates into rural areas, villagers nowadays are becoming increasingly money-conscious. Although free interviews for survey purposes are still possible, some compensation to the respondents in the form of payment or gifts is welcome.

CHAPTER 3

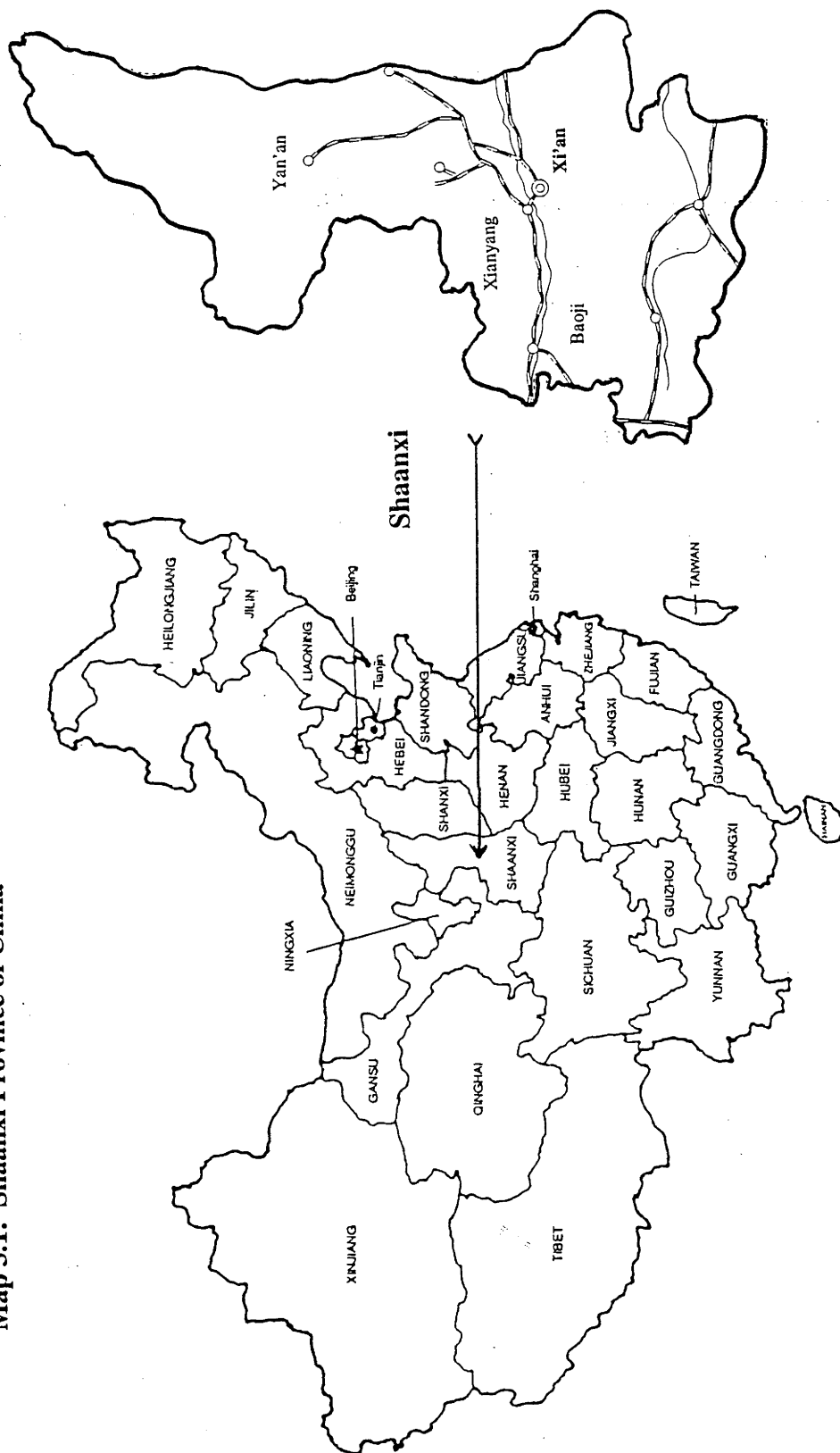
THE STUDY SITES: PINGLING AND NANSHANGZHAO

3.1. Selection of the study site

As described in Chapter 1, this study aimed to examine how individuals and families adjust their expectations and strategies of old-age support in response to the vigorous enforcement of government family planning programs and a functional return to family farming at village level in rural China. To select a proper study site poses the first challenge for accomplishing planned objectives, not only because of the vast options but also because of the limited time and financial budget. In any situation, it is hard for a single location to permit conclusions about rural China as a whole, although a certain degree of representativeness should be present in the selection procedure. At least, single location studies can provide rich insights into the mechanisms that are likely to be operating in other places as well. At the preliminary stage three factors influenced the selection of the current study site, Nanshanzhao village in central Shaanxi Province.

1. China is a large developing country, composed of 32 provinces, municipalities and autonomous regions with a total land territory of 9.6 million square kilometres. For a series of natural, historical and political reasons, there are marked disparities in social and economic development among different regions. Traditionally, inland and frontier provinces were less developed than coastal provinces. Over the last two decades of economic reforms, regional differences have become increasingly evident, with inland provinces lagging further behind the coastal ones. For example, the per capita GDP of some inland provinces is only one-third of that of coastal provinces. In terms of population distribution, the more industrialised coastal provinces commonly have high population density and a large share of urban residents. On the other hand, frontier provinces are usually characterised by extremely low density and large shares of ethnic minorities. Therefore, Shaanxi, an inland province located in central China (Map 3.1), is considered a relatively proper choice for this community-

Map 3.1: Shaanxi Province of China



based study. As Table 3.1 shows, the selected demographic indicators of the province are also close to the national average.

Table 3.1. Selected indicators of population and family planning, China and Shaanxi, 1995

Item	China	Shaanxi
Total population (million)	1,211.2	35.1
Proportion rural (%)	71.2	74.2
No. of persons per household	3.7	3.8
Dependency ratio (%)	50.2	52.9
Crude birth rate (per thousand)	17.1	15.9
Crude death rate (per thousand)	6.6	6.6
Growth rate (per thousand)	10.6	9.4
Proportion illiterate (%)	12.0	13.0
Contraceptive use rate (%)	90.4	90.7

Source: Population Statistics Department, SBS (1996).

2. Over the last two decades, the Government has introduced in rural China drastic reform measures in two fields: economic decentralisation that replaces communal farming with family farming, and family planning programs, including the controversial One-Child Policy. Numerous studies have been conducted in recent years on the profound impact of these reforms on rural society. In mid-1993, for example, Greenhalgh (1994), together with her colleagues of the Population Studies Institute of Xi'an Jiaotong University, conducted a microstudy in three villages in central Shaanxi, as a follow-up to their 1988 project at the same location. Greenhalgh believes Shaanxi is an attractive site for research on reproduction because throughout the post-1949 period, fertility in the province has for the most part closely tracked the national average. Located near Xianyang, the villages are considered ideal for community studies because they have neither been overwhelmed by the forces of modernisation nor left untouched as a remote backwater. While examining the effect of reform measures on villagers' everyday life, Greenhalgh found that government economic and population policies were no longer working at cross-purposes, with substantial demographic changes accompanied by accelerating economic change. The joint efforts of programmatic and economic measures have successfully achieved fertility decline through altering people's ideas about home and family life. Therefore, it was

considered ideal if this study could be conducted in one of Greenhalgh's three villages to make full use of her previous findings.

3. For a micro-demographic community-study, the intensive personal involvement of the researcher is indispensable. Understandably, to ensure the success of the study, the researcher should be familiar with the local situation and able to communicate directly with villagers. Being a Shaanxi native born in Xi'an, the capital city, I speak the local dialect and lived for two years in a village after leaving high school about a decade ago. In addition to my personal experience, also taken into account is the fact that my parents and friends in Xi'an could provide necessary logistic support when I was in the field. As it turned out later, personal connections did work in some stages of my study and helped overcome a number of unexpected problems. Maybe it is also a part of China's present reality that could be exploited.

Although I had already in mind a rough idea about the field site, to settle on the final choice still took a few weeks' time before and after I returned to China in mid-1996. My first task was to complete the proper documentation. According to the current government policies, all research projects conducted by foreigners, including overseas Chinese students, in China have to be approved and registered in advance by relevant government departments. Apart from financial issues, the prime concern of the Government is that no classified and sensitive information is allowed to leak, particularly political information. To my knowledge, this policy was not carried out with the same thoroughness in all places before 1989. However, special efforts were made after the 'Tiananmen Incident' to tighten up control on foreign-sponsored research projects in China. Before I left for the fieldwork, therefore, I sent a letter, together with an outline of my research proposal, to my previous employer, the Research Institute of Economics of the Chinese State Planning Commission, applying for approval and support. In my letter, I raised three points to justify my proposal. First, I am still considered as a full employee on leave, and my study overseas was approved by the Institute in the first place. Secondly, the study is concerned with old-age support in rural areas, a narrow and specific topic in

demography, not as controversial as birth control programs. Moreover, the objectives quite agree with the Government's social security strategies. Finally, as part of my study, the fieldwork is limited to a short period and in a small rural community. After receiving an affirmative response from the Institute, I contacted Professor Zhu Chuzhu of the Population Studies Institute of Xi'an Jiaotong University for advice. I had met Prof. Zhu a couple of times before, and more importantly, she was among Greenhalgh's team during the 1994 study in Xianyang. In reply, Prof. Zhu was happy to offer me a favour.

After I returned to China, I talked with Prof. Zhu in her Xi'an office about my research proposal in further detail. In general, she thought my study very interesting and my planned activities practical. However, to choose the same villages in Xianyang as those of Greenhalgh's previous study looked a little problematic. Being a famous demographer with a special interest in China, Greenhalgh has visited the villages several times since the early 1980s. Based on her fieldwork there, she has published a number of papers on China's population policy, fertility changes and the effect of economic reform at the local level. Greenhalgh's work is appreciated by both Chinese and foreign demographers as informative, unbiased, of high academic standard and of great value. However, Prof. Zhu had heard from villagers lately that the village cadres were under certain pressures since Greenhalgh left. It was said that, unhappy with her findings, some senior family planning officials at provincial level blamed village cadres for leaking too much information to a foreigner. Anyway, the cadres now no longer welcomed outsiders to do research in their communities. To avoid possible disappointment, Prof. Zhu advised me not to stick to the three villages as my study site; there are plenty of villages to choose from the region. While accepting Prof. Zhu's advice, I could not help wondering how Greenhalgh had upset the officials in Shaanxi. While reading her latest papers (Greenhalgh, 1993, 1994), I guessed that the officials might be not at ease with her discovery of the so-called '*de facto*' population policy. Unable to reconcile state demands with peasant demands, according to Greenhalgh's peasantisation theory, village cadres 'engineered' a number of pragmatic measures to favour fellow-villagers. For example, most couples are permitted to end up with two children, including one son. Such measures, on the contrary, might well

be seen by officials as a challenge to authority or an indication that the birth control policy has failed. It is particularly unacceptable that such unauthorised measures were found out by a foreigner and publicised internationally, although people at home usually turned a blind eye.

The government office I visited in Shaanxi at the provincial level is the Provincial Committee on Ageing, a special organ of the Provincial Government in charge of policy-making, co-ordination and consultation in issues concerning the well-being of the aged population. Functionally, the Provincial Committee is also affiliated to the National Committee on Ageing under the State Council in Beijing. I talked with the officials of the Committee about my research project, hoping that they could help me identify a rural community near Xianyang as my field site. I was told that I had better go first to Qindu District, which is on the office's list of model districts in promoting the well-being of the elderly. I was therefore referred to Mr. Guo Xiyun, the Director of the District Committee on Ageing in Qindu.

My meeting with Mr. Guo for about two hours turned out to be a very fruitful interview. The District Committee on Ageing is subordinated simultaneously to the district government of Qindu and the Municipal Committee on Ageing of Xianyang City. Having been working at the current position since 1992, Mr. Guo has ample knowledge of government policies on ageing and the current situation of the elderly in his area. Thanks to his hard work, two villages in the district have been recognised as model units by the Provincial Committee on Ageing. According to Mr. Guo, the villages where Greenhalgh visited before are experiencing even greater changes. As early as the late 1980s, according to Greenhalgh (1993), the villages were well-off by provincial standards, because local income was generated predominantly from high-priced cash crops, mainly vegetables and flowers. In recent years, numerous small factories and shops have mushroomed after the nearby Xi'an-Baoji freeway was completed in 1993. Mr. Guo thought that, even if it is still possible to arrange a visit there through other official channels, the villages themselves are now too wealthy to represent the average situation in the district. In comparison, he

recommended a moderately developed township, Pingling, for me to stay during the fieldwork. Mr. Guo later gladly arranged for me a reference letter from the district government. The village of Nanshangzhao was chosen after consulting with township officials because of its easy access to public transport.

3.2. Regional setting of the study site

The township of Pingling is about 60 kilometres north-west of Xi'an, the capital of Shaanxi Province. Shaanxi is situated quite centrally on the map of China. In fact, the geological centre point of the country is found in Jingyang, central Shaanxi. The province is bounded by Shanxi and Henan on the east, Hubei and Sichuan on the south, Gansu and Ningxia on the west, and Inner Mongolia on the north (Map 3.1). Stretching 1,000 kilometres long from north to south, and 360 kilometres wide from east to west, Shaanxi covers an area of 205,600 square kilometres, with a total population of 35.1 million in 1995. Administratively, the province consists of 13 cities, five prefectures, and 84 counties.

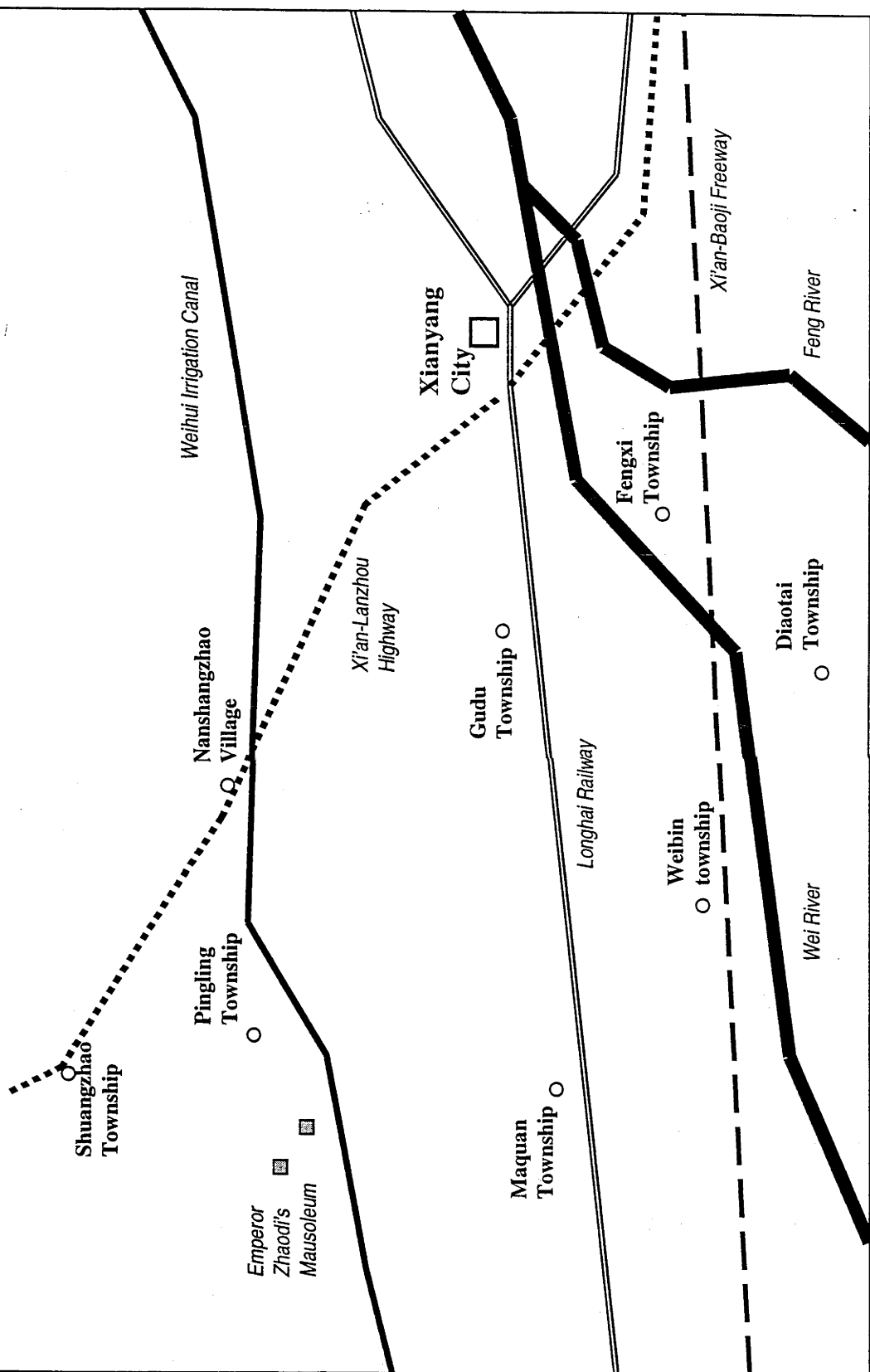
Within the province, three environmental and economically distinct regions may be designated: North Shaanxi, the Guanzhong plain and South Shaanxi. Being part of the loess plateau, North Shaanxi is considered the most underdeveloped region. The persistence of poverty owes much to the natural environment: low temperatures, a short growing season, sparse rainfall, and severe soil erosion. Nevertheless, the discovery of huge coal and natural gas reserves in the region in recent years will certainly make an important contribution to local development in future. South Shaanxi refers to the narrow Hanzhong basin and the neighbouring mountainous regions sandwiched by the Qinling range and the Daba range. Thanks to the favourable climate, the region abounds in agricultural and forestry products, such as rice, tea and timber. The major problem of the local economy is transport bottlenecks. In recent years, three railway lines have been completed to connect the region with neighbouring provinces. In comparison, the Guanzhong plain is not only the most developed, but also the most populous in the three

regions. With less than one third of the province's total area, the Guanzhong plain accounts for over half of its total population and nearly 80 per cent of its gross domestic product (GDP).

The Guanzhong plain almost coincides with the Wei River valley that cuts through the centre of the province from west to east. Situated in the warm temperate zone, the region is one of China's major agricultural bases. Wheat, corn, cotton, tobacco and fruit are among the staple products. Since the 1950s, industrial development has made great progress, particularly in the sectors of machine-building, textiles and energy. In recent years, there has also been unprecedented growth in high-technology sectors like electronics, petrochemicals, pharmaceuticals and aviation. Local industries are concentrated primarily in three large cities: the capital city of Xi'an, and the two major industrial centres of Baoji and Xianyang. Generally speaking, the overall development of the Guanzhong plain still lags behind that of the coastal regions. According to the Government's 10-year strategy of economic development till 2010, efforts will be made to shift gradually the future centre of gravity from coastal regions to inland and frontier regions. In this process, the Guanzhong plain is well positioned as a bridge to connect the relatively prosperous East China with the less developed West China.

The Guanzhong plain has long been considered one of the cradles of Chinese civilisation. Before the tenth century, it had been the political, economic and cultural centre of China for more than 1,100 years. Fourteen dynasties founded their capitals here. Even today, visitors to the region are continuously reminded of its glorious past. They may visit numerous historical remains such as the neolithic Banpo village (4000 B.C.), the chariot-and-horse pits of the Zhou dynasty (1000-800 B.C.), the terra cotta army guarding the tomb of China's first emperor (221-206 B.C.), the Grand Wild Goose Pagoda of the Tang dynasty (618-907), or China's only remaining city wall of Xi'an built in the Ming dynasty (1368-1644). Over the last few centuries, the importance of the region declined for a number of reasons. The clock of history almost stopped, and the society was mostly

Map 3.2: A sketch map of Pingling Township and its surrounding areas



closed to outside influences. Not surprisingly, the Guanzhong plain is a place where historical and cultural heritage is not only richer, but also better preserved than in other parts of China.

Pingling is one of the nine townships under the jurisdiction of Qindu District of Xianyang City, almost in the centre of the Guanzhong plain. Unlike Fengdong Township which Greenhalgh visited, Pingling is not directly on the Wei River, but on a plateau 20 kilometres to the north of the valley (Map 3.2). The name of the township, Pingling ('Mausoleum of Peace'), was given after the burial site of Emperor Zhaodi (94-74 B.C., reigned 87-74 B.C.) of the Han dynasty, a 30-metre high tomb mound located less than two kilometres to the south of the township site. Nearby is the mausoleum of the empress, Xiaozhao. In fact, as one comes to the plateau, the first sight must be the amazing mausoleums of different sizes rising above the alluvial plain all the way to the horizon. Buried under the tombs were emperors, kings, their royal family members and numerous ministers and generals. Although many have been badly eroded or damaged over the last centuries, these tomb mounds undoubtedly form a unique part of the local landscape, awakening in visitors a deep sense of history. It is not uncommon to find in the region a township or a village named after the mausoleum close by.

As shown in Table 3.2, Pingling Township consisted of 18 villages, with a total of 3,430 households and 17,390 residents. Most villagers in Pingling depend on farming for their basic livelihood; their chief crops are wheat, corn, and fruit. Rural enterprises such as those that have sprung up on the outskirts of Xianyang and along the Wei River valley are still in their infancy here. In 1995, the per capita annual income was 1,023 *Yuan*, 60 *Yuan* higher than the provincial average of 963 *Yuan*. The township government is located in Daiwang Village. Together with the government offices are a number of service extensions targeting local population, such as a high school, a hospital, a credit co-operative branch office and an agricultural technology promotion station. Each of these organisations is affiliated to a specific higher government department. For example, the township high school is administered by the district education bureau, and the agricultural

technology station is controlled by the district agriculture bureau. The township also runs a small home for four childless old people.

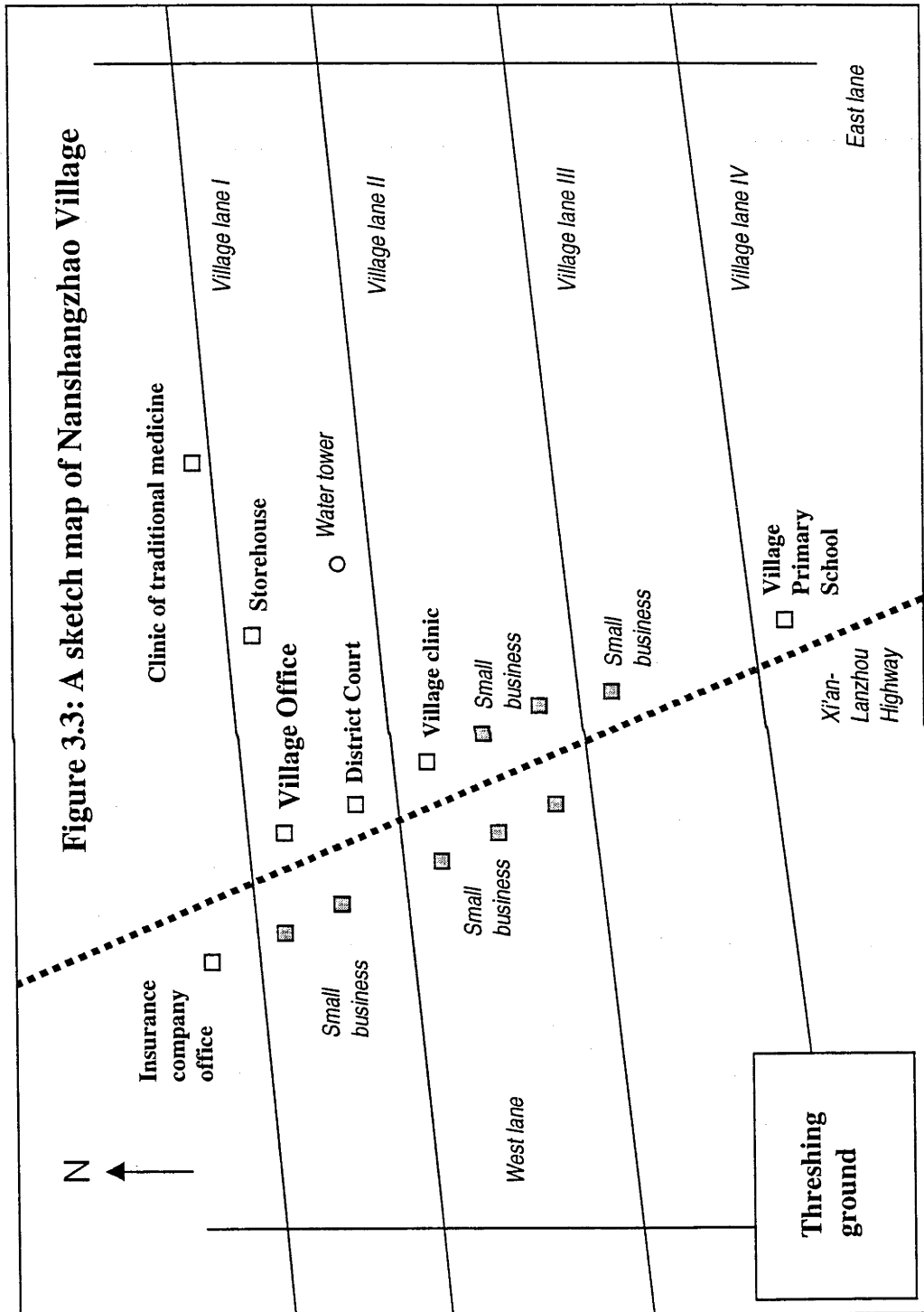
Table 3.2. Selected socio-economic indicators, Pingling Township and Nanshangzhao Village, mid-1996

Item	Pingling	Nanshangzhao
Total population	17,390	1,174
No. of males	8,280	577
No. of females	9,110	597
No. aged 60+	1,538	93
No. of labour force	6,782	428
No. of households	3,430	275
Total farmland (ha.)	1,800	130
Proportion irrigated (%)	88.9	84.6
Proportion non-irrigated (%)	11.1	15.4
1995 per capita income (<i>Yuan</i>)	1,023	1,280
No. of affiliated villages	18	0

Source: Secondary data collected by the author during the fieldwork.

Nanshangzhao is one of the 18 villages affiliated to Pingling Township (Map 3.3). A 1995 village census recorded 275 formally registered households and 1,174 residents. Most families have their own walled courtyard, and all courtyards are arranged along the four parallel village lanes. Most families still live in the traditional one-storey houses built with bricks and tiles. There are also a few two-storey buildings of cement prefabricated components, standing out from the other houses around. The village has been connected to the local power network for more than 20 years, and since the late 1980s a running water system has been completed. In the middle of the village, the Xi'an-Lanzhou Highway cuts through diagonally from south-east to north-west. The highway is the major road link between Xi'an and other counties in the north-western part of the province. Every day hundreds of trucks, buses and cars travel in both directions. Because of the highway, the village acts as a small transport hub for the surrounding area, particularly the township site that is located a further five kilometres to the west and only accessible through country roads. People travelling in and out of the area have to change at the bus stop in Nanshangzhao. It is no wonder that the highway has now become increasingly the

Figure 3.3: A sketch map of Nanshanghao Village



centre of the village's daily life. Almost all important village utilities can be found by the sides of the highway: a village office, a clinic, a primary school, a storehouse, and a number of small private businesses. The District Court has an office here that opens twice a week and handles minor legal matters in the region, mainly civil disputes. Lately a state-owned insurance company, the Xiangyang Insurance Company, has also moved its branch office from the township site to Nanshangzhao owing to its advantageous location.

The total farmland of Nanshangzhao is about 130 hectares, now all leased out to families under the household responsibility system. Although the village is set upon a plateau much higher than the Wei River valley, nearly 85 per cent of the farmland is irrigable thanks to the nearby Weihui Irrigation Canal. The current problem is that water supply from the channel is not always sufficient to meet the demand, particularly in dry seasons. Strict control over water distribution has to be imposed by the local government. The crops cultivated by the villagers include winter wheat, corn, cotton and rapeseed, with the wheat the most important in terms of total output, subsistence and sale to the state. In recent years, small orchards began to appear in the fields. Taking advantage of the village's position as a transport hub, some villagers have opened their own businesses. By the end of 1995, there were already four shops engaged in motor and agricultural machinery repair, seven in agricultural product processing, five in retail and restaurants, and one in civil construction. Although for the majority of families, farming is still the main source of income, income from non-agricultural sources has increased sharply since the reform. In 1995, the per capita annual income was 1,280 *Yuan*, nearly 25 per cent higher than the township average.

3.3. Institutional changes in the study site

Originally, it was said, there was only one village in the region called Shangzhao. Since the Xi'an-Lanzhou highway was completed in the 1930s, people started moving in from neighbouring villages to build houses along the highway. In the late 1940s the village

already had about 50 households. To distinguish it from the old village of Shangzhao to the north, the new one was named Nanshangzhao, South Shangzhao. People in the old Shangzhao, now Beishangzhao, or North Shangzhao, mainly belonged to the Liu family. To this day, Liu is a dominant surname in Nanshangzhao. Also influential in the village are the Chen family and the Zhang family. Because the village has a relatively short history, and the early residents came from different origins, Nanshangzhao is now a village with people of several different clans living together. To the current study, this is a fact of great relevance, given its variation from the traditional single-lineage village where all the males were descended on their father's side from a single common ancestor.

Like most rural communities in China, the village of Nanshangzhao has experienced drastic changes in its social and economic life since 1949. It is worth noting that most of these changes took place as a direct result of government intervention from above rather than by gradual evolution from within. It is well known that the Chinese government adheres to a state socialist ideology according to Marxist concepts. Socialist theory gives high priority to public ownership and economic development in an attempt to transform the whole society. In practice, the theory was translated, regrettably, into a totalitarian political system based on one-party rule and a command economy based on central planning. Ideology in China is not only a vague legitimization of the institutional structure of authority, but also an instrument for the exercise of political and administrative power and for the implementation of policy. Over the last few decades, the government has launched numerous ambitious campaigns of social engineering, with many unpractical ideas and reckless power. In spite of possible good intentions, as recent history proves, most of these experiments eventually failed, leaving serious consequences. Since the late 1970s the market-oriented reform has greatly weakened the mechanism of central economic planning, but the highly centralised control system under the one-party rule has hardly changed. The state still reserves tremendous power and resources in commanding the society and influencing people's daily life.

Xianyang City and its surrounding areas, including Nanshangzhao, were officially 'liberated' by the Communists from the Nationalists in the summer of 1949. As part of the national efforts of land reform, work-teams were sent in the early 1950s to rural areas to redistribute land to the landless from landlords. In comparison with stories of violence and bloodshed in other places, land reform in Nanshangzhao proceeded relatively smoothly, because there were neither many landless people nor landlords with extensive landholdings in the village. However, this period of private farming lasted only a couple of years. By the end of 1954, all land was collectivised into co-operatives (*hezuoshe*) according to government instructions upgrading the mutual-aid teams (*huzhuzu*). Attributable primarily to the socialist ideology of public ownership, the idea is that, rather than helping in each other's fields in busy seasons, villagers would pool their land and animals for the whole year. In this way, the villagers' tiny plots could be combined into larger fields to be ploughed and irrigated more efficiently. At the end of the year, villagers would divide up the profits. To a certain extent, the co-operatives promised more security, considering the risks a single family has to face if it works individually. At the earlier stage, the division of profits was based on both labour inputs and the use of land or draught animals. After 1956, however, the co-operatives were reorganised in such a way that only labour inputs would be counted in profit division. Naturally, not all villagers were willing to join such a system, especially the small number of wealthy families with larger land plots or more farm animals; but they were forced in under government pressure. Before long, all villagers in Nanshangzhao were organised into two co-operatives. Having lost its major means of production, including land and animals, the household was no longer a production unit, although each family could still retain a small plot for growing vegetables.

Private farming has existed in China for thousands of years. People had little experience in managing large areas of land or organising large numbers of labourers under the collective arrangement. However, before the villagers had time to get used to the new system, an even more radical, and disastrous as proved later, social experiment, the commune system, was launched in 1958 by the government. Chinese leaders at the time falsely believed that the bigger the units of agricultural production, the more advanced in

socialism they would be. The village collectives were required to combine with neighbouring villages to form huge people's communes (*renmin gongshe*). Nanshangzhao was thus incorporated into Daiwang Commune together with another 17 villages, now called production brigades (*shengchan dadui*). The two previous co-operatives were renamed production teams (*shengchan xiaodui*).

In contrast to private farming and small co-operatives, the commune was in principle multifunctional, responsible for local government, Party affairs, social welfare (such as secondary education and hospitals), economic planning, culture and communications, public security, rural investment projects (such as land improvement and irrigation works), local industry and commerce, and technical extension services. The production brigade was responsible for small-scale rural infrastructure and social welfare (primary schools and clinics). The production team was the basic unit of production, distribution and account. As regards production, when, where and who would do what were entirely decided by the team heads, usually in line with the annual plans handed down from the commune government. The team was expected to absorb all villagers, regardless of their labour power, into the collective labour force, so that they all earned workpoints (*gongfen*) corresponding to their input. Usually, there were a number of point categories, such as males, females, the elderly and children. If an able-bodied man got ten points per day, a woman could only get eight points. The elderly and children could earn five points at best. At the end of a year, or a busy season, the team calculated revenues and expenditures and distributed income to team members in cash and kind according to their contribution enumerated in work points. Theoretically, the income to each member was a share of the team's net income after paying taxes and reserving the accumulated funds for productive investment, social welfare and village cadre's salary. According to the recollections of the elderly in Nanshangzhao, the value of ten work points ranged from 0.5 to 1.5 *Yuan* in the 1960s and 1970s. No longer playing any part in decision making at the team level, the household was only an economic unit in the sense of labour contributions to collective production and the production of non-staple foods for self-consumption or exchange. In Nanshangzhao, the cultivation of the private vegetable plot and the raising of

domestic livestock (such as pigs and chickens) had always been a key source of food supply and cash income of the household.

Stemming largely from the ideal of a communist Utopia, as can be seen, the commune system was far out of touch with rural China's reality. Although it was successful in securing political control by confining rural residents in a hierarchical network, it failed to achieve the original target of promoting agricultural production. The system was too rigid to organise production efficiently, and it did not provide effective incentives for individual effort. Peasants were deprived of every freedom and initiative to increase output and generate extra income. In consequence, productivity was dampened and the living standard in rural areas had hardly improved over 20 years. In fact, the forced implementation of the commune system was blamed by researchers for causing the disastrous famine from 1959 to 1961, in which as many as 23 million excess deaths were estimated (Peng, 1987)³. As the 'Cultural Revolution' came to an end in the late 1970s, the Government finally realised that urgent changes were needed in both policies and institutions, given the sluggish agricultural production and widespread discontent among the rural population.

Nationally, the decollectivisation reform started in 1978 with the introduction of the household production responsibility system (*jiating shengchan zerenzhi*). After the commune system was abolished in the early 1980s, the government adopted a new two-layer system at township and village levels. The township government retains most administrative functions of the commune, such as public security, legal affairs, taxation, technical extensions, disaster relief, health, and education. Primarily playing the role of guiding and planning the local economy, the township government does not directly interfere in the day-to-day production and management activities of individual households. Currently, the township government is the lowest unit in the formal government hierarchy,

³ In Nanshangzhao, according to the recollections of local old people, few people died during the so-called 'difficult period' as a direct result of hunger. Although there were reports of widespread food shortage and malnutrition, the traditionally grain-producing Guanzhong plain was only moderately

and its officials are appointed and paid by the state. At village level, the villagers' committee (*cunmin weiyuanhui*) is responsible for administration and social welfare previously controlled by brigade and team heads. The committee is defined as a 'mass organisation of self-management', and its members are all part-time workers elected by fellow villagers. In the study area, Daiwang Commune was replaced by Pingling Township in 1982, and the villagers' committee in Nanshangzhao was established in the following year. In 1995, the committee was made up of five persons, including a head, two deputy heads, an accountant, and a woman (my hostess, Ms. Bian) in charge of women's affairs and family planning. Actually, the committee members, also called village cadres, have multiple tasks and duties as an indispensable link between the government and villagers, including enforcing government policies such as the birth control policy, keeping the village accumulation fund, maintaining community services such as the power and water supply, taking charge of village construction work such as the roads and irrigation channels, overseeing the welfare of villagers such as the primary school and the elderly committee, and mediating in possible disputes. The village cadres are paid from the village accumulation funds, which are derived from two sources: annual levies on households in the village, and rent from the village's communal properties, such as houses and machines.

In the most common form of the household responsibility system, the villagers' committee contracted out land and production output quotas to each household. Land was principally allocated on a per capita basis and for a period of time, taking account of quality. Households are now in full control of the means of agricultural production such as tools, animals and mechanical equipment, and are responsible for the development of their own economy and the management of their own productive operations. The production output quotas are the amount of output households are obliged to deliver to the state as tax payment or to the village as accumulated fund contribution. The remaining output is then at their free disposal to consume, to sell on the free market, or sell to the state at higher-than-quota prices. Since the land is still considered collectively owned, the

affected by the famine. Moreover, the famine was caused largely by government failures in distribution rather than natural calamities *per se*.

household is thus paying a 'rent' to the village 'landlord'. To encourage land improvement and long-term investment, the contract period has been extended from 15 years in the early 1980s to 30-50 years in the mid-1990s. In practice, the household has already gained *de facto* permanent control over the land.

In Nanshangzhao, this drastic transformation went through two stages, each marking a further step away from collective agriculture. At first in 1980, the contracting unit was a small group within the previous production team in a system called 'contracting output to the group' (*lianchan daohu*). In 1982, however, official permission was given for contracting to individual households (*baochan daohu*), indicating a full return to household agriculture. After the initial division of land, parcels were reshuffled later at village level in 1986 and 1990 to adjust to population changes. The 1990 contract guarantees each member in a household 1.5 *Mu* (0.1 hectare) of land for 30 years. The landholding of each family ranged from 0.2 hectares to 0.8 hectares. The land distribution plan took into consideration to a great extent the original land ownership during the Land Reform period. If possible, families were allocated the plots that used to be under their name. In this way, a lot of disputes, such as disputes over land quality, the distance from the village, or access to irrigation, have been largely avoided. About three hectares of communal land remained undivided, mainly for three purposes: reserved housing sites for newly married couples, a village threshing ground, and a graveyard on the edge of the village. According to instructions of the local government, no further reallocation will be carried out in future.

3.4. Economic changes in the study area

In line with the institutional changes, drastic economic changes also took place in the study area over the last few decades. Since the reform of the late 1970s, the local economy has been experiencing a gradual transformation from a largely self-sufficient economy to a commodity economy. Although agriculture was still the dominant sector, non-agricultural sectors were playing an important role in absorbing surplus labour and

generating income. Even in agricultural production, machinery and modern technology have become increasingly popular.

3.4.1. An increasingly diversified rural economy

Traditionally, the local economy of Pingling and Nanshangzhao was entirely based on agriculture, mainly grain and cotton production. During the commune period, the production plan was set strictly by the commune government, including crop mix, sown area for crop varieties, time of sowing and output targets. Leaders of the production brigades and teams were responsible for fulfilling production plans and tax quotas handed down from the commune government. Individual farmers had little say in the decision-making process. Now that farmers have gained *de facto* long-term control over the contracted land under the household contract system since the early 1980s, they also have to take responsibility for the development of their own economy and the management of their own farming operations from sowing to harvesting, in order to bring out sufficient products to meet their own consumption, fodder for animals, a surplus for exchange on the market, tax quotas set by the state, and contributions to community welfare funds. Responsibility for production not only makes greater demands on the family to cultivate the land intensively and carefully, it also encourages the family to diversify its activities on and off the farm, from grain production to animal husbandry, cash cropping, and other non-agricultural activities.

Agricultural production was still the dominant sector of the local economy in the study area. As shown in Table 3.3, the majority of household heads (73.6 per cent) reported in the household survey that agriculture was their main source of income. People relying on non-agricultural activities as their main income source accounted for 26.4 per cent. A household head refers here to the person who was so recorded on the official household registration card. In most cases, the household head was the main bread-winner of a family, but there were also exceptions⁴. Here two points deserve further explanations.

⁴ Detailed information on household structure is discussed in Chapter 5.

First, the main income source of a household head does not necessarily mean his only income source. The household head might also earn income from other sources, only of less importance. Second, other family members also make their contributions to the family economy. The income of the household heads does not necessarily have a dominant influence on the family's overall living standard, which is calculated on a per capita basis.

Table 3.3: Percentage distribution of household heads by monthly income and main income source, Pingling, 1996

Main income source	Income group (<i>Yuan</i>)			Total	All	No.
	<199	200-299	300+			
Agriculture	53.1	28.7	18.2	100.0	73.6	209
Rural industry	41.7	29.2	29.2	100.0	8.5	24
Private business	36.0	32.0	32.0	100.0	8.8	25
Others	26.9	34.6	38.5	100.0	9.2	26
All	47.9	29.6	17.6	100.0	100.0	
No.	136	84	50			284

Source: Household survey data

Household heads reporting agriculture as their main income source tended to have a lower income. More than half (53.1 per cent) made less than 200 *Yuan* per month, the highest proportion in this group. In contrast, less than one fifth (18.2 per cent) made more than 300 *Yuan* per month, the lowest in this group. Among the respondents working mainly in rural industry, the proportion in the low-income group was also high (41.7 per cent), probably because most of them were unskilled workers, and rural industry usually could not afford to pay high wages. Respondents in the private business category fell into the three income groups almost with equal proportions, 36.0, 32.0 and 32.0 per cent, respectively. This reflects to a certain extent the fact that this sector is financially relatively diversified and volatile. Comparably speaking, respondents in the last category had a higher income, with nearly two fifths (38.5 per cent) earning more than 300 *Yuan* per month. People in this category were mainly government employees or contract workers in the city. Their income was normally high and stable. Of all household heads interviewed, nearly half (47.9 per cent) fell into the low income group, chiefly because of the dominant share (73.6 per cent) of those working in the agricultural sector.

3.4.2. Agricultural production: toward mechanisation and commodity production

In the study area, agricultural production can be roughly divided into three groups: grain production, cash cropping, and animal husbandry. Winter wheat and maize are the two staple crops in terms of total output, subsistence and sale to the state. Other side crops like millet, beans and sweet potato are also grown by some families, but in limited amounts. Thanks to the favourable climate conditions of the Guanzhong plain⁵, double cropping is common in Pingling and Nanshangzhao. That means winter wheat and maize can be harvested on the same plot in one year. Winter wheat is normally sown in late October or early November, depending on the temperature and the moisture in the soil. After the wheat is harvested in early June the next year, the land is quickly prepared for planting maize. Understandably, quick land preparation is also required after maize is harvested in late autumn. In fact, both the sowing and harvesting must be finished in a matter of days to make full use of the frost-free period. Therefore, early June and late October are the two busiest seasons for farmers.

The period between planting and harvesting entails a continuous process of field management, including watering, fertilising, weeding, and monitoring. As mentioned above, the majority of the land in the study area is irrigated: 88.9 per cent in Pingling, and 84.6 per cent in Nanshangzhao. Apart from isolated wells, water comes mainly from the Weihui Irrigation Canal that runs through the region. Irrigation was repeatedly mentioned by villagers during my interviews and the focus-group discussions as an important task in farm work for two reasons. On the one hand, water is specially needed when crops are flowering and heading in late spring (for winter wheat) and early autumn (for maize). However, rainfall is usually inadequate during these periods in the region. On the other hand, the water from the irrigation channel has to be distributed evenly when the demand is high. In each village, a special water manager is appointed to take charge of water distribution by time and amount. Families have to wait in turn according to the

⁵ The average annual temperature is 13.4 degrees Celsius, with a total frost-free period of 218 days.

prearranged time table to get the water channelled to their contracted plots. Given that the whole year's harvest is at stake, farmers cannot afford to waste any time, when it comes to their turn to use the water, no matter if it is in the daytime or in the night. Usually, it is the strongest and the most skilful person in the family who takes the job, most likely a young man. Such pressing work generally takes place four to five times a year. Families without able-bodied labourers have to ask relatives or hire someone else to do the work. Therefore, for the farmers in the study area, to have a young man at home capable of carrying out essential farming tasks like watering fields is essential to maintaining the household economy. During the focus group discussion, for example, when asked why they believed each family should be allowed to have at least one son, old people specially mentioned the importance of male labourers in completing the irrigation task. In comparison, other field management activities, such as fertilising, weeding and monitoring, are not as physically demanding. Much of this work is carried out by women or the elderly.

During the commune period, the average output of winter wheat was about 200 kilograms per *Mu* (one fifteenth of a hectare), much lower than that of maize at 300 kilograms. Because of the state monopoly in the grain trade, nearly half of the wheat produced had to be handed over to the state as tax in-kind. Villagers relied mainly on maize as their staple food. In recent years, because of the promotion of high-yield varieties, per unit wheat output increased by almost 50 per cent to 300 kilograms. In normal conditions, the total grain output per *Mu* can reach up to 600 kilogram. In the meantime, the government has changed the calculation of tax payment. Instead of 100 kilograms of wheat per *Mu* in the early 1980s, the tax rate in the mid-1990s was set as 100 *Yuan* per *Mu* for grain production. The special requirement on grain variety was also dropped. That means both wheat and maize would be accepted. Maize as a coarse food grain is considered inferior to wheat in taste and nutrition. Therefore, farmers commonly preferred to pay the tax in-kind with maize, in the equivalent to the tax rate. Given that the 1996 price of maize stood at 0.8 *Yuan* per kilogram, for example, a total of 125 kilograms maize was enough to pay the unit land tax. Should they choose to pay with wheat, 67

kilograms was already adequate, because of the higher price of wheat at 1.5 *Yuan* per kilogram. Thanks to increased production and the reduced tax burden, farmers nowadays have more left for self-consumption or exchange on the market.

In the study area, agricultural mechanisation and the use of modern technology have made noticeable progress in recent years. Nowadays, much of the heavy farm work is done by machinery, chemical fertiliser has replaced farmyard manure, and farmers enjoy a wide range of services from various technical extensions. During the commune period as late as the 1970s, villages had to keep a large number of draught animals for ploughing and transport tasks. Harvesting was chiefly completed manually. In recent years, machine use became increasingly popular in agricultural production, whereas draught animals were almost reduced to a rarity. In Nanshangzhao, as shown in Table 3.4, farmers possessed a total of 47 agricultural machines of different types. Some old machines used to belong to the previous production team, only to be sold when the team was dismissed in the early 1980s. Others were mostly bought by villagers in the last few years.

Two major factors have facilitated agricultural mechanisation in the study area. From the government side, mechanisation of agriculture is a major component of rural reform policies. In the early 1980s when the commune system was abolished, local technical extensions formally managed directly by the commune government were transferred to company ownership. Agricultural machinery stations, plant protection units and seedling units were now operated by a staff as independent economic entities. Villagers' committees make regular contracts with the companies to hire their large machinery for busy seasons, and individual households could also ask for their services at a fee. In fact, the fees charged were subsidised, largely to cover the running costs such as fuel, since extension staff were still on government payrolls. On the other hand, special policies have been adopted to encourage factories producing small, practical, and affordable equipment and machines to meet the changing needs of family farming. In the late 1980s, Qingdu district where the study site is located was chosen for a pilot program by the government to promote agricultural mechanisation. According to the 1991 figures,

the district had a total of 7,672 agricultural machines, including 3,299 tractors and 224 trucks.

Table 3.4: No. of agricultural machines by type, Nanshangzhao, 1996

Type	No.
Tractor, including mini-tractor	15
Truck	1
Other agricultural machine	7
Machine for agricultural product processing	8
Other small motive power machine, including water pump, diesel engine and power generator	16
Total	47

Source: Secondary data collected by the author during the fieldwork.

From the farmers’ side, people have become increasingly aware from government promotion and their own experience of the benefits of modern technology in raising per-unit output and productivity. Thanks to the rising income brought by the reform, villagers were also financially able to pay. For a family with an average annual income of 5,000 *Yuan*, for instance, a mini-tractor at 2,000-3,000 *Yuan* is not entirely out of reach. Moreover, local agricultural banks and rural credit co-ops (*nongcun xinyongshe*) offered special low-interest loans to farmers to buy machines. In the study area, mini-tractors were very popular because they could be used not only for ploughing, but also as a means of transport, providing for villagers an additional income source during slack seasons. An informant, who was contracted to transport building materials for a private construction company, said that he could earn up to 30 *Yuan* in one day’s work. In this way, the cost of the tractor could be paid off very quickly.

‘Taking grain as the key link’ (*yi liang wei gang*) used to be the government policy in rural areas during the commune period. As farmers started to manage their own household economy after the reform, they realised gradually that the old slogan is not necessarily effective in maximising income. Strongly influenced by government policies, the grain price in China has been controlled at a low level for decades. Even the market price does not differ a lot from the official level. In the study area, for example, the total

grain production per *Mu* was valued at only about 570 *Yuan* (300 kilograms of wheat at 1.5 *Yuan* per kilogram and 300 kilograms of maize at 0.8 *Yuan* per kilogram), allowing for tax payment. If half of the grain was reserved for self-consumption, half for sale at market price, the per unit cash income was only about 280 *Yuan*. Because of the low price of grain products, farmers are no longer interested in growing grains. In Nanshangzhao, most families kept only part of their contracted land for grain production, just enough for self-consumption, the state tax and animal fodder. More and more farmers turned to cash cropping and other sideline production to diversify the household economy and maximise income. In fact, the government policy has also been revised in favour of 'an all-round development' (*quanmian fazhan*).

The traditional cash crops in the study area are cotton and rape seeds. During the commune period, these crops were grown largely according to government production plans. Also as required, the products were mostly sold to the state at a fixed low price. To farmers' actual income, there was little difference between growing grains and growing cotton. In the first few years since the reform in the early 1980s, growing cotton was very popular among local farmers after the government doubled the purchase price. In general, the per unit revenue from cotton production was twice or three times as high as that from grain production. However, since the early 1990s, farmers' interest has gradually shifted from cotton to more profitable fruit-trees, because of a number of drawbacks of cotton farming. For example, cotton is prone to diseases and insect pests, and needs regular watering and fertilising. The field management is particularly labour-intensive, requiring continuous pruning and flower thinning. Allowing for high labour and financial input such as fertilisers and pesticides, the net income is not quite satisfactory.

Shaanxi is one of the main fruit producing provinces in North China. In 1995, the total apple output of the province reached 1.8 million tonnes. In Xianyang, the government has also made efforts in recent years to promote fruit production as one of the major sectors of local agriculture. By the end of 1994, the region already had 4,000 hectares of orchards. In the study area of Pingling and Nanshangzhao, many farmers

started developing orchards on their contracted land for growing apples, pears and peaches. Apple trees were the most popular, especially the new varieties like Qingguan and Red Fuji. At the time of my field work, some orchards were still in their infancy, with young trees standing side by side with wheat. The owners were optimistic about the harvest in three or four years' time. Although a lot of work was needed in the initial period, the yielding period of fruit trees could be 15-20 years. In the study area, apples were sold for about three *Yuan* per kilogram, and top-quality fruit could reach five *Yuan* per kilogram. For a mature orchard, it was not difficult to draw a net income of 2,000 to 3,000 *Yuan* annually, minus input and tax⁶. Generally speaking, work in orchards is physically not demanding, and a lot of old people like working there.

In the study area, as mentioned above, draught animals have almost disappeared in recent years. Animal husbandry refers here mainly to raising domestic animals, like pigs, milch goats, and chickens. During the commune period, families raised pigs and chickens mainly for sale on the market. This had nothing to do with commodity production, but simply because it was almost the only source of cash income of farmers, as described in a local saying that chickens were the farmers' small bank. Now, farmers raise pigs and chickens mainly for self-consumption. A piglet is usually bought in the spring, and butchered in winter before the Chinese New Year. As encouraged by the government policy of promoting specialised commodity production, a few families in the study area have already started to run small chicken farms in their backyards. Each chicken farm normally keeps 100-150 chickens in piled coops, and produce 5-6 kilograms of eggs per day. Eggs are sold on the free market in the nearby city of Xianyang. At the price of about five *Yuan* per kilogram, the family's daily cash income could easily reach 30 *Yuan*. However, to run a chicken farm, even a small one, is different from raising just a few chickens at home. Apart from initial investment, a certain knowledge of farm management and disease prevention is necessary. In the study area, it is still not a business for everyone.

⁶ The tax rate for cash crops was 400 *Yuan* per *Mu*, and could be paid in cash.

3.4.3. Non-agricultural sectors: in search of new opportunities

In the study area, the non-agricultural sector of the local economy has experienced unprecedentedly high growth in recent years under the government policy of 'an all-round development'. More and more people are now engaged in wage employment. As shown in Table 3.3, of 284 household heads interviewed in Pingling, over one fourth (26.4 per cent) reported non-agricultural activities as their main income source, 8.5 per cent from rural industry, 8.8 per cent from private business, and 9.2 per cent from other non-agricultural sector jobs.

During the commune period, rural industry was non-existent in the study area. All forms of private ownership were banned, and even lucrative household sidelines, such as poultry, pigs and handicrafts, were discouraged. Privately owned business was simply a taboo. Rural people were confined to their village by the household registration system (*hukou*), and their major income source was workpoints from participating in group labour day in and day out. Without proper documentation, there was little chance for villagers to travel to the cities or richer regions in search of jobs. For a rural youth who wanted to leave his home village, there were just two possible channels: to pass the state examination and be enrolled in a college (sometimes a polytechnical school), or to join the army. In principle, only a college graduate or a discharged soldier could be assigned a formal-sector job in the city. It was seldom that factories recruited workers directly from rural areas. If at all, rural people were hired mainly as manual labourers.

Since the decollectivisation of the early 1980s, the government has not only replaced the commune system with family farming, but also introduced policies to promote rural industry and private business. Most restrictions on migration under the *hukou* system have been lifted, and people are free to move and look for jobs in places other than their birth-places. Apart from the favourable environment created by the government for diversifying the rural economy, there was also a demand from the villagers themselves.

Since the reform, families are now responsible for the development of their own economy and the management of their own farming operations. They do not have to spend all the time on the farm as in the commune period, just for earning a few workpoints. Farming on the small contracted land requires only half or one third of that time used before. Also, farmers are now more flexible in time allocation, and able to work out their own schedule according to the actual need. As a result, an unprecedented phenomenon has appeared in rural China, often described in Chinese official publications as underemployment⁷, or labour underutilisation, or surplus labour. That means, rural people are now looking for more job opportunities and higher income outside the farming sector.

In fact, the 'floating population' has become a big headache for the Chinese government in recent years. It refers to people staying in places where they do not have a permanent local resident status. Reportedly, the 'floating population' increased its size from 50 million in 1990 to nearly 100 million in 1995. A 1996 survey conducted by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences found that 80-90 per cent of the cross-regional migrants were rural labourers looking for jobs in urban areas. The economically advanced coastal regions were major recipients of inter-provincial migration. Chan and Yang (1997) attributed the major cause to rural decollectivisation, which has set free as many as 200-300 million surplus labour previously locked up in the countryside. The rapid expansion of non-public and informal sectors was another contributing factor. Of course, the current relaxation of migratory controls has also played a role.

In the study area, as discussed above, non-agricultural activities can be grouped into three categories: rural industry, private business, and other activities. Rural industry includes both collectively and privately owned factories or companies in the community. The respondents were usually full-time or part-time employees in the industry. Private business refers to small businesses owned by the respondents. Two groups of people reported working in the other-activity category: first, full-time or part-time employees of

⁷ Theoretically, farmers are not considered as unemployed in official statistics.

the local government and other service branches; and second, migrant workers who found full-time or part-time jobs in cities.

In Pingling there were two collectively owned factories: one produces building materials, and the other is specialised in tablets and boluses of Chinese herbal medicine. The factories were managed by villagers' committees, and the profit was partly distributed among villagers, and partly transferred to welfare funds. There were also a number of privately owned small companies. For example, in Nanshangzhao, a private construction company was making big profits in recent years by taking advantage of the construction boom in both urban and rural areas. As in most parts of China, Xianyang and the surrounding region has become a giant construction site in recent years. Even in rural areas, farmers were making efforts to improve housing conditions. The company owner, Mr. Liu Qifang, used to work in a collectively owned construction company in a neighbouring county. He went back home and set up his own business in the late 1980s. By making full use of his experience, connections, and not the least, entrepreneurship, Mr. Liu never lacked contracts. Sometimes he had to hire up to 20 young people to meet the time limit of a project. It was impolite to ask about Mr. Liu's total income directly, but his beautiful family house was evidence of his wealth. More importantly, he has helped create jobs for fellow villagers. A casual worker could earn up to 20 *Yuan* per day while working in Liu's company.

Small private business has become very popular in recent years since the government legitimised private ownership as part of the market-oriented reform. Private business was considered one of the most expandable areas in the rural economy. It had the advantage not only that its labour and capital were chiefly provided by the individual family, but that, at little cost to the state or the collective, it provided needed services and goods to the community. In the meantime, private business could make quick returns to the family and provide employment for surplus labour. In Nanshangzhao, for example, there were 17 formally registered small businesses at the time of my fieldwork: six shops in the retail and hospitality sectors (three restaurants, two grocery stores, and one barber

shop), four repair shops for motor vehicle and agricultural machinery, and seven cottage workshops for sideline production. Compared with neighbouring villages, Nanshangzhao has more small private businesses, because of its well-placed location by a busy highway. A family-run business usually employed just a few people, and the profit differed from one to another. I was told that motor repair shops made the highest profit, up to 50 *Yuan* per day on average. Since the early 1980s, most village clinics have also been privatised. Nanshangzhao had two clinics at the time of my fieldwork: one specialised in Western medicine and the other in traditional Chinese medicine. The former was also responsible for child and maternal care, and distributing contraceptives. These two clinics could also be considered as private businesses.

In recent years, a number of rural labourers also found jobs in the nearby city of Xianyang. Some just took casual jobs, while others found full-time jobs as contract workers (*hetonggong*) for a certain period, commonly three years. For example, many girls in the study area have found jobs in the textile industry. Xianyang used to be a textile industry centre of the region. However, it has become increasingly difficult lately for factory managers to recruit new workers from young women in the city. In comparison, country girls are preferred because they are more submissive and less demanding about wage and work conditions. Girls went to Xianyang not only for a chance to experience city life, but, more importantly, for a stable income. Financially, most unmarried young women in the area were still dependent on their family. Stable income would greatly improve their independence and status at home. In addition to contributions to the family, girls also have to save some money for their future marriage. During my stay in Nanshangzhao, I only heard of two people who had ever travelled to other provinces looking for job. Cross-regional migration for employment did not seem to be popular in the area.

In the non-agricultural category, there were also people working for the township government and its affiliated extensions. They not only earned more secure incomes, but also enjoyed higher social status. Apart from a few leaders, most employees of the

township government were natives of the region, roughly divided into two groups: the older *minban* workers, and the newly recruited. During the commune period, the government used to hire high school graduates to work part-time in various local extensions such as primary schools, village clinics and the township agricultural machinery station. They were called community-funded (*minban*) workers, because they were paid mainly by community welfare funds. After the commune was dismantled, most *minban* workers were 'upgraded' to government employee status through an examination and registration procedure. Since the early 1990s, the district personnel departments have introduced a recruitment policy, allowing rural youths to directly apply for junior jobs in township governments. Although the quota was still limited and the competition fierce, this policy provided at least another chance of social mobility for local people.

3.5. Family planning in the study site

Since the late 1970s, rural China has experienced another drastic reform: population reform characterised by coercive birth control programs, including the controversial One-Child Policy. Compared with the institutional and economic reforms discussed above, the population reform has been implemented by the government with more specific targets and more intense vigour.

Birth control as a government policy in China has gone through several stages since 1949, and varied under the changing socio-economic environment. In the early 1950s when China was recovering from civil war, the government was confronted with mounting tasks to consolidate its political power, restore social order and revitalise the economy. While firmly dismissing the doubts of some Western politicians on the Communists' ability to feed China's huge population, Mao proudly announced his belief that for China the numerous population was a 'wonderful blessing'. China could well cope with the situation even if its total population might multiply several times, because people are not only consumers but also producers according to the Marxist theory. So the question was not whether China was over populated but whether it had enough manpower

to speed up its industrialisation drive. This optimistic, but rather simplistic and biased viewpoint, underlay all major government policies concerning population issues in the 1950s, which were mostly pronatalist.

In the mid-1950s, early family planning measures were introduced first in cities, such as legalising abortion and sterilisation and promoting contraceptive use. However, emphasis was primarily put on improving maternal and child health rather than limiting population growth. An explicit birth control policy was issued in the early 1960s only after the second baby-boom caused deep concern about the problem of unchecked population growth. Family planning offices (later renamed family planning commissions) were set up at both national and provincial levels, and pilot family planning programs, with education and free distribution of contraceptives, were introduced in selected areas. Although there was no clear-cut target for population growth, a slogan was employed to disseminate the government's viewpoint on ideal family size: 'one child is not too few, two children are just enough, and three children are too many'.

In the early 1970s when economic and social order was gradually restored throughout the nation after the early chaos of the 'Cultural Revolution', family planning resurfaced at the top of the government's policy agenda. Population growth targets were formally embodied into national development plans from 1973. A renewed birth control campaign was launched under the slogan '*Wan, Xi, Shao*', which outlines the three government endorsed reproductive norms of later marriage, longer spacing and fewer births. Although there were regional variations in the recommended age of late marriage and the recommended years of birth spacing, two was the universally recommended number of children for each couple.

The country embarked on a renewed drive for modernisation in the late 1970s as the 'Cultural Revolution' came to a close. Top priority was given to the 'Four Modernisations' of agriculture, industry, defence and technology. The government's plan required that the per capita GNP would quadruple from about US\$ 250 in 1979 to US\$

1000 by 2000. To achieve this ambitious target, the total population as a divider must not surpass 1.2 billion. Apart from these macro-economic rationales, the government also realised from a number of population projections that, given the young age structure of the population, the growth momentum could hardly be stopped even if couples had only two children. Only if 95 per cent of married couples in the cities and 90 per cent in the countryside had only one child in due course, could the total population of China be controlled at about 1.2 billion by the end of this century. Consequently, the One-Child policy was adopted as the strongest-ever measure in China's family planning programs. Although it is arguable how much the policy enforcement is coercive, remarkable progress has been achieved in recent years to curtail rapid population growth. For example, China's recorded Total Fertility Rate (TFR) dropped sharply from 5.8 in 1970 to 2.14 in 1990. Some scholars even believe that the fertility may well have fallen below replacement level in the early 1990s (Feeney and Yuan, 1994).

China's birth control policy is in fact a combination of goals of late marriage, late childbearing, few births, and quality births (*wanhun, wanyu, shaosheng, yousheng*). The One-Child policy is a simple generalisation of this policy. To this date, birth control remains principally a national guideline. It is the local governments, primarily the provincial governments, that are responsible for working out concrete regulations, including population growth targets, conditions for having additional children, incentives and penalties, in accordance with local social, economic, political and cultural conditions. In Shaanxi, the first provincial regulation was formulated by the Provincial Family Planning Commission, and approved by the Provincial People's Congress in 1981. Shaanxi policy followed the national guideline in setting its own targets. The criterion for age at marriage was 23 for women and 25 for men, although the legal marriage age was set in the Marriage Law at 20 for women and 22 for men. Late childbearing was defined as delaying the first birth until the mother is over the age of 24. As for the number of births, rural couples were allowed to have an additional child if they were classified as facing real hardships. The first child being a girl was considered one of those special conditions. According to the revised 1986 regulation, villagers whose only child was a girl became

eligible to have a second child. However, those permitted to have a second child were required to space four years between their first and second births. At local levels, the provincial regulation is again subject to amendments by local governments. For example, the regulation enforced in Pingling was issued in 1994 by the township government based on the regional regulation of Xianyang City.

Birth control as a basic state policy is implemented through the existing centralised control system of the government, from the national level all the way down to the village. At each government level, there is a family planning commission in charge of formulating policies according to the national guidelines and co-ordinating programmatic activities in its dominion. Meanwhile, a mass organisation called the Family Planning Association is organised among program workers and activists at corresponding levels. Usually, the fulfilment of birth control plans ranks with major indicators of how a government performs in its term. Top officials keep pressing lower-level cadres to meet the plan targets through speeches, conferences and internal circulars. Also mobilised is the huge network of auxiliary organisations, such as party branches, women's federations, trade unions and youth leagues. In the 1980s mass campaigns and crash programs were frequently used as major implementation methods, leading to occasional reports of violence and infanticide. In recent years, however, more routine and systematic methods were adopted to monitor fertility and ensure that targets were met. In the meantime, family planning commissions greatly expanded the network of technical service. In 1996, 85 per cent of townships in the Xianyang region had established their own family planning service stations and 20 per cent of villages their own family planning service clinics. In addition, 48 per cent of villages had at least one part-time family planning worker, 1,850 in total.

As observed by Greenhalgh (1993) in the other three Xianyang villages in the early 1990s, local cadres 'engineered' a number of *de facto* policies to reconcile the state demands and villagers' actual needs. Similar *de facto* policies also existed in the study site in mid-1996. For example, late marriage and late childbearing virtually disappeared from the policy objectives, and the requirement for spacing was often traded off for fines. As

mentioned above, late marriage was promoted mainly in the early stages of birth control campaigns in rural areas. After the 1980 Marriage Law set the legal minimum age at marriage at 20 for women and 22 for men, the average age at first marriage in China decreased markedly. For example, the average age at marriage of rural women dropped from 22.3 in 1982 to 20.5 in 1990 (Sun, 1994). In Pingling, most young women got married as soon as they reached the legal age of 20, and conceived their first child immediately. In recent years, under-age marriage became so common that the township government had to issue a special circular to tighten up the marriage registration rules. Young couples would only be granted a marriage certificate after submitting a document from the villagers' committee to verify their age, together with their own birth registration cards. A 500-*Yuan* fine would be incurred if couples were found to be married without proper registration. According to one informant, some parents who desperately wanted their children married early even bribed village cadres to write them a reference letter.

In comparison to the timing issue, the current policy gives more importance to controlling the number of births. Generally speaking, the township regulation of Pingling differs little from the provincial regulation in the number of children couples are allowed to have. Couples with one boy are asked to stop childbearing, and those with a girl can apply for a plan quota once the first child is four years of age. Under no circumstances will a third birth be permitted. Commonly, there are three types of enforcement methods: administrative discipline, material rewards and economic penalties. In the township regulation can be found more detailed requirements. For example, couples with one child must use contraceptives, and those with two children must undergo sterilisation. In Nanshangzhao, the only contraceptive method recommended is the IUD, and wives are most likely to undergo sterilisation. A husband is only suggested for the operation if the wife is not in good health. To ensure that all eligible women take appropriate birth control methods, the township government introduced in early 1996 a mandatory bi-monthly check-up among all married women in reproductive ages. The township hospital charges four *Yuan* for the check-up, which is aimed at the provision of reproductive health care, the insertion or verification of IUDs, and the detection of out-of-plan pregnancies. If a

woman fails to appear, a 10-*Yuan* fine will be imposed. The result will go on each woman's personal family planning record kept since 1995 by the village family planning worker. It seems that policy implementation depends increasingly on economic penalties. For example, those eligible women who are found not to have an IUD will be fined 100 *Yuan*, and those who have not been sterilised will be fined 500 *Yuan*. Much higher fines will be imposed on couples who have unauthorised births, 4,000 *Yuan* for the second and 8,000 *Yuan* for the third, up to eight times the per capita annual income of 1995. If the offenders go away before clearing the fine, the village has the power to reclaim the land plot contracted to them.

At its face value the township regulation looks very harsh. However, the data collected from the village family planning records of Nanshangzhao indicate that the actual results of previous programmatic efforts are not as good as expected. Ms. Bian, the village program worker, keeps a record card of contraceptive use for every married woman up to age 40. From 1979 to 1996, there were 296 births to the 151 women on the record, 153 boys and 143 girls. Allowing for the 12 childless newly-wed, each woman had on average 2.1 births. Of all women with children, 65 had two, 34 had three and eight had as many as four. Only 32 women had one child at the time of my fieldwork. It was still uncertain whether they would progress to the second birth later on⁸. According to Ms. Bian, most of the high-parity births occurred in the late 1980s when policy enforcement was somewhat relaxed in the region. However, two unauthorised births were recorded as late as 1995. In spite of such obvious violation of the birth control targets, no serious efforts were made to collect the fines.

The unsatisfactory performance of family planning programs in villages like Nanshangzhao is attributable largely to the changing role of village cadres, who play a dual role in rural China. On the one hand, they are charged with enforcing state policy among the rural populace. On the other hand, they are firmly rooted in the local community and supposed to serve their fellows. As Chan, Madson and Unger (1984)

⁸ More detailed discussion is in Chapter 6.

concluded, rural cadres appear to have mediated state-community conflicts by kowtowing to the state during periods of mobilisation, but helping the local community in quieter times. Since the reform, it has become increasingly difficult for the authority to exercise direct control over village cadres, who are now elected by fellow-villagers rather than appointed by township officials. When state rules challenge local values, such as during birth control campaigns, village cadres often try, and sometimes succeed in, distorting central policy in favour of local interests (Greenhalgh, 1993). As I heard from an informant, village cadres nowadays would rather resign if things went badly wrong than risk spoiling their relations with fellow villagers.

Perhaps realising that village cadres are no longer reliable, or co-operative and supportive enough, in enforcing birth control policies, the local government has to send its own employees to the countryside. During my fieldwork, I coincidentally witnessed a new crash campaign in the study site in late April 1996. Work-teams were sent down by the district government; they were composed of officials, family planning workers and medical personnel, and provided with transport and equipment for contraceptive operations. Each team was designated to work in a number of specific townships⁹. In the meantime, township governments also organised their own employees to assist the district officials. Work-teams were assigned three major tasks: to check if all eligible women had taken the compulsory bi-monthly examination, to perform contraceptive operations (IUD insertion or sterilisation) for those who were supposed to have them, and to collect outstanding fine payments. The district government required the teams not to withdraw before every family was visited. Obviously, local governments cannot rely on such crash mobilisation repeatedly for enforcing such a long-term policy as birth control. However, villagers did feel the pressure of the visible presence of a large number of officials. Village cadres also had a good excuse to throw the blame upon others, while mediating face-to-face between officials and villagers.

⁹ A work-team of 55 officials and program workers from 13 departments, with five motor vehicles, were assigned to Pingling and the two neighbouring townships of Shuangzhao and Mazhuang.

Table 3.5: Contraceptive use of married women under 40, by method and number of children, Nanshangzhao Village, mid-1996

Method	No. of children				All	Percentage
	0	1	2	3+		
No use	12	0	0	0	12	7.9
IUD	0	32	20	8	60	39.7
Female sterilisation	0	0	44	34	78	51.7
Vasectomy	0	0	1	0	1	0.7
Total	12	32	65	42	151	100.0

Source: Secondary data collected by the author during the fieldwork.

Before I left the village of Nanshangzhao, all but two married women under 40 had undergone the examination obediently, and all women with children were using contraceptives¹⁰. As can be seen in Table 3.5, 51.7 per cent of all married women under 40 used female sterilisation, 39.7 per cent used IUD and 0.7 per cent used vasectomy. However, it is interesting to find that 28 women with two or three children still used IUD, instead of sterilisation as the regulation required. I was told later that these women had been using IUD for several years. As long as the devices worked well, there was no need to ask them to change to sterilisation because of the high cost, 45 *Yuan* in comparison to 7 *Yuan* for IUD insertion, and possible health risks. Also I heard that the two families that had unauthorised births in 1995 eventually made up the fines they had evaded. The tactics used by the work-team were, on the one hand, to visit (or more precisely harass) the families every day, pressing for the payment; on the other hand, families that made the payment by the deadline on 10 May were promised a 50 per cent deduction.

3.6. Summary remarks

Pingling Township and Nanshangzhao Village were chosen as the site of this study by taking into account both the original research design and the recommendations from local officials and experts. Although it is unrealistic to expect a community study to permit

¹⁰ The two women were at the time working in cities.

conclusions about rural China as a whole, it certainly can provide rich insights into the topic under investigation.

Like most rural communities in China, Pingling and Nanshangzhao have experienced drastic social and economic changes over the last few decades. In review of the recent history of the study site, two points are relevant to further discussions in following chapters. First, what differs from other developing countries on a similar modernisation course is that changes in China result primarily from the government's direct intervention based on ideological concepts or macro socio-economic rationales. With little power of decision-making in the current political system, villagers have been subject to various social engineering experiments that are not necessarily always in their best interest. Second, the highly centralised political control system and mass mobilisation are two effective means of the government to enforce policies. This unique mechanism helps translate the central leaders' political will swiftly and thoroughly into nationwide practice, leaving far-reaching consequences to the society. In recent years of reform, villagers have begun to enjoy more freedom and power in making decisions about their own well-being. However, as the case of the birth control campaign shows, they still cannot escape entirely from government intervention.

CHAPTER 4

ECONOMIC WELL-BEING AND SOCIAL STATUS OF THE ELDERLY

4.1. Socio-economic development and the status of the elderly

The status and well-being of old people have long been a focus of recent studies on old-age security and support. In literature, however, there is no consistent use of the status or well-being of the elderly. Terms alternatively used also include situation, position, standard of living, quality of life, and so on. Although each of these terms carries its own connotations, in a general sense all are referring to some overall assessment of an older person's life. Rudkin (1993) proposed that the status of the elderly could be divided into six dimensions: social status, level of activity, level of authority, economic status, physical status and psychological status. Most discussions in previous literature did not go into such details. To avoid possible confusions, the economic aspect of the question is defined in this chapter as economic well-being, and the social aspect as social status. Understandably, the two aspects are interrelated and interactive. Two additional issues should be addressed in the status study. First, status comprises characteristics of both the individual and his environment. That means status should be discussed more or less in relative terms, including not only a comparison between an individual's past and present experience, but also a comparison between his own experience and that of others. Second, a complete picture of the status should include both the subjective and the objective aspects: it should also involve what people expect and what people experience (Palmore and Whittington, 1971).

In recent years, a number of theories have been developed to explain changes in status of the elderly in the course of modernisation. Cowgill and Holmes (1972) suggested that an inverse linear relationship exists between societal modernisation and the status of the elderly: the more industrialised a society becomes, the lower the status of the old person. Other studies have shown, however, that this relationship between modernisation and the status of the elderly is not linear, rather curvilinear across the entire range of

societal complexity or development (Balkwell and Balswick, 1981). The elderly are accorded a low status in simple nomadic societies, a high status in settled agricultural communities, and a low status in modern industrial nations. The critical factor is how older persons control valued resources. In agricultural societies, particularly in the highly developed type of agricultural technology (intensive agriculture), the resources (the subject of inheritance) and skills of older people may be most valuable to others, resulting in high status. In contrast, property ownership is irrelevant to economic well-being in hunting and gathering societies, and very few members of industrial societies make a living from accumulated property assets. Wealth instead is acquired primarily by individual labour or by participation in the labour force. As the society becomes increasingly industrialised, the status of the elderly declines because of their declining control over valued resources, or the declining value of the resources they control. The inability to maintain control of critical knowledge in modern society is another factor that contributes to the loss of status. However, Palmore and Manton (1974) believed the curvilinear relationship is J-shaped. After a decline during the early stages of modernisation, the status of the elderly will stabilise and may even begin to rise when societies 'mature'. On the one hand, the rates of change level off and the discrepancies between aged and non-aged decrease. On the other hand, new institutions such as social security and retirement benefits will replace family in maintaining the status and well-being of the elderly.

Lee and Kezis (1979) found that certain familial factors also affect the status of the elderly, and these factors are likewise correlated with type of economy. The status of the elderly is higher in societies with extended family systems than in those with nuclear families. The extended family is most often patriarchal, which means that power and lineage are traced through the males of the family. Moreover, status is high in societies with unilineal kin groups and patrilocal postmarital residence customs. Not surprisingly, such customs are commonly found in agricultural societies. Other researchers pointed out, however, the pitfalls of using 'nuclearisation' of the family to explain a decline in status of the elderly. Traditional society can hardly be generalised into one household type

(Quadagno, 1982); and family living arrangements are constantly changing as family members experience different events (Martin, 1990).

From their study on the effects of socialisation values and ancestor worship, Ishii-Kuntz and Lee (1987) concluded that older people have higher status in societies where conformity is highly valued in children than in those in which self-reliance is a primary socialisation value. The inculcation of the value of conformity in children comes to constitute a resource for parents in old age. But when children are encouraged to be self-reliant, their independence from the senior generation results in lower status for the elderly. The practice of ancestor worship is also positively correlated with the status of the elderly. The effects of socialisation values reinforce Lee's (1984) argument that familial factors are important in the determination of the status and treatment of older people in society.

The status of the elderly was high in traditional Chinese families, which agreed exactly with the characteristics researchers suggested above. First, China was for thousands of years a typical agricultural society, where land was the major means of production and subject of inheritance, and old people were respected for their knowledge and skills in agriculture. Second, most families were extended in structure and patriarchal in nature, which means that power was often concentrated on elderly men in the family. Third, according to the Confucian teachings, in Chinese families ancestor worship was strictly observed, and conformity and filial piety were highly valued in children. In fact, as Whyte (1997) observed, family life in the traditional Chinese society offers such a sharp contrast with that in Western societies that many family sociology textbooks devote one chapter or two describing the unique Chinese patterns.

Since 1949, the Chinese government has conducted a series of far-reaching experiments in social engineering. Davis and Harrell (1993) observed that the state socialism of the pre-reform period (1949-1979) has influenced the intergenerational relations within Chinese families in two conflicting ways. On the one hand, it destroyed

much of private property, the economic basis that bonds the family and shapes family loyalty, and undercut the power and authority of patriarchs by attacking ancestor worship and gender inequality, the cultural and religious core of the extended family. On the other hand, it created conditions that stabilised and strengthened the traditional family. For example rising living standard and better health care reduced mortality, fewer infants died, living to old age become the norm, and limited migration under the household registration system (*hukou*) tied most adult men, the major providers for the elderly parents, to the place of their birth. All these factors have helped people from all social groups maintain larger and more complex kin networks than had been possible before 1949 (Tu, Liang and Li, 1989). Davis-Friedmann (1991) also noted the contradiction: although the state ideology differs greatly from Confucianism, the government not only tolerated but also encouraged certain traditional values and institutions like family support and long-term reciprocal care because of a number of considerations. Economically, the government is unable to finance and manage an all-inclusive social security system to replace the family's traditional functions. Politically, the stability of the family is valued as an essential factor in maintaining social order and control.

As for the effect of state socialism on the status of the elderly, there are two conflicting theories. One theory is that the elderly have reaped many benefits in view of the socialist commitment to public ownership, egalitarian distribution of wealth, and collective responsibility for the material well-being of all citizens. The basic survival of those who can no longer support themselves was guaranteed, and life expectancy increased thanks to major improvements in public health. The improved security and longevity were not primarily the result of expanded public welfare measures. Instead, they were the result of policies that promoted stable family life and created the material and social conditions permitting adult children to support and care for their old parents (Stacey, 1983; Davis-Friedmann, 1991). The other theory is that the authority and power of the aged in families was weakened as a result of the elimination of private ownership of land and capital; also the government's atheist propaganda works against Confucian values and traditions. Younger members of the family were expected to be dutiful citizens first, filial children

second; formal education was in state schools with a unified curriculum; and government officials made job assignments. These changes reduced not only parents' control, but also intergenerational loyalty and interdependence. Consequently, parents could not effectively discipline or punish those children who deserted them or failed to provide adequate support (Cherry and Magnuson-Martinson, 1981).

With the shift from a state socialist economy to a market-oriented economy, China has entered another drastically altered environment since the late 1970s. In rural areas, the reform measures resulted in the replacement of the commune system by family farming on *de facto* private land. The new system has greatly boosted agricultural production and the income level of rural people. As for its effect on the elderly, there were a number of conflicting arguments among scholars. Some suggested that since peasants now work and manage their fields on a household basis, the new reforms should reinforce the traditional values on filial piety and the extended family. As family income increases, some peasants, although still a minority, are able to accumulate adequate funds to finance their own retirement (Olson, 1988; Thireau and Kong, 1994). For example, many villages that have become wealthy enough have developed their own community pension schemes. Others argued that the new reforms are likely to diminish the security of the aged because welfare assistance previously provided by communes is either no longer available or very limited. The increased opportunities for the younger generation in out-migration and wage employment, and the growing influence of materialism and consumerism, may foster endless generational conflict over the distribution of family resources (Goldstein, Ku and Ikels, 1990).

As mentioned previously, the modernisation theory asserted that the status of the elderly would decline in the course of socio-economic development. Although frequently cited as the most influential in the study of the aged population, it has also been frequently criticised as an oversimplification of reality (Goldstein and Beall, 1982). A number of issues deserve special attention when the status of the elderly in rural China is considered. First, part of the attraction to modernisation theory may be based on a distorted view of

the experience of the elderly in Western, more modern societies (Martin, 1990). In a Third World setting like rural China, modernisation at this stage is far from complete. Compared with Western societies, the modernisation in China has achieved much greater progress in a much shorter period. It takes time for old social values and norms to adjust to the changed material reality. Second, the classical description of agricultural societies in the modernisation theory does not readily apply to the situation in rural China where land is nominally collectively owned and a state socialist economy is still functioning. Third, the modernisation theory gives more emphasis to the changes in social status than the economic well-being of the elderly. As the living standard of the population as a whole rises sharply from a near-poverty level in rural China, old people will certainly benefit as well. It seems that all researchers agreed that their economic well-being has improved since the reform. What they disputed was whether old people were still socially influential, and whether they were still properly taken care of.

4.2. The elderly in the study area: a profile

4.2.1. The elderly as seen from survey data

From the household survey conducted in Pingling, basic information on a total of 1,198 persons was collected, including 214 co-resident old people aged 60 and above. Table 4.1 provides a rough picture of the old people surveyed through three socio-demographic indicators: sex, age and education. Despite the small sample size, such information may be helpful for further discussions about the elderly's economic well-being and social status in the study area.

Of the 214 old people, women accounted for 53.7 per cent and men for 46.3 per cent, with a sex ratio of 86.2 per cent. This complies to the typical pattern that the sex ratio is lower than 100 per cent in old age groups, when old men are commonly survived by old women. However, the survey ratio is slightly lower than the 1992 national average of 89.7 per cent (China Research Centre on Ageing, 1994). There was clearly a negative

correlation between sex ratio and age. Sex ratio decreased as people became older. In the youngest old group of 60-64, the sex ratio was still quite high at 120.7 per cent. It dropped from 100.0 per cent in the next old group of 65-69 all the way to 58.7 per cent in the oldest old group of 75 and over. Old men in this last group were outnumbered by old women by almost half.

Table 4. 1: Distribution of the elderly by selected socio-demographic indicators, Pingling, 1996

Item	Age group				All	No.
	60-64	65-69	70-74	75+		
A. Sex						
Male	54.7	50.0	40.0	37.0	46.3	99
Female	45.3	50.0	60.0	63.0	53.7	115
Sex ratio	120.7	100.0	66.7	58.7	86.2	
B. Marital status						
Unmarried	0.0	1.9	0.0	0.0	0.5	1
Currently married	81.3	63.0	64.0	34.8	62.6	134
Widowed	18.7	35.1	34.0	65.2	36.4	78
Separated	0.0	0.0	2.0	0.0	0.5	1
C. Education						
Illiterate or semi-literate	68.8	70.4	74.0	80.4	72.9	156
Primary school	17.2	24.1	20.0	15.2	19.2	41
Junior high+	14.1	5.6	6.0	4.3	7.9	17
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	
No.	64	54	50	46		214

Source: Household survey data.

At the time of the household survey, the majority of old people (62.6 per cent) in Pingling were currently married. In comparison, over one third (36.4 per cent) of the elderly were widowed. It is evident that the widowhood rate increased with age, from 18.7 per cent in the youngest old group to 65.2 per cent in the oldest old group: three in five old people in this group were widowed. Obviously, widowhood rates differ also between old men and old women. As mentioned above, old women normally have a higher survival rate, because women tend to marry older men than themselves. In rural China where the influence of traditional values is still strong, old women seldom remarry after the death of their husbands. A further examination of the survey data reveals that, in the oldest old

group, the widowhood rate was 47.1 per cent among men, and 75.9 per cent among women.

Education is useful as an indicator in the discussion because it is not only an outcome of the elderly's status in the past, but also a factor that still affects their status in the present. In old times, only wealthy families could afford to send their children to school, and even in wealthy families, education was a privilege reserved primarily for boys. On the other hand, education provides a person with opportunities to learn more skills and make higher income. Thus, higher educational attainment increases people's ability to accumulate sufficient resources, resulting in enhanced status and secure old-age support. In the study area, as seen from Table 4.1, the situation of educational attainment and literacy among the elderly was quite poor. The majority (72.9 per cent) fell into the category of illiterate or semi-literate. The semi-literate refers here to people who have some schooling but not up to the primary graduate standard set by the government education department. About one fifth (19.2 per cent) had completed primary school, and only a small proportion (7.9 per cent) reached junior high and above level. There was also a negative correlation between educational attainment and age. The oldest old group had the highest proportion of the illiterate and the lowest of junior high school graduates. Gender differences in literacy among old people were more striking, with old women having much lower literacy rates than old men. For example, the illiterate accounted for 46.0 per cent among old men, while it doubled to 95.7 per cent among old women. Understandably, the high illiteracy among the rural elderly was attributable to the fact that they lived most of their early years in poverty before the accelerated socio-economic changes since 1949 and the introduction of the universal primary education policy in the 1950s. It was a quite different picture for people in younger age groups. For example, the illiterate accounted for only 2.1 per cent in the group 18-39, and for 15.6 per cent in the group 40-59. In comparison, 82.1 per cent in the former group and 44.7 per cent in the latter group have completed junior high education.

4.2.2. The present-day elderly: a unique generation

According to modernisation theory, the critical factor affecting the status of the elderly is how they control valued resources in a society. For example, old people enjoyed high status in agricultural societies because resources (the subject of inheritance) and skills they controlled might be most valuable to others, particularly in the highly developed intensive agriculture. In rural China, land is the primary resource of agricultural production. A noticeable feature distinguishing traditional Chinese agriculture from other agrarian civilisations was family farming on small land plots. Because of the mounting population pressure and diminished arable land, tiny farms were cultivated with such an extraordinary labour intensity, that Stacey (1983) described it as 'gardening'. This familial mode of production shaped not only family size and structure, but also the status of members in the family. Being the production chief, the family head usually had absolute authority. Men enjoyed higher status than women did, because they performed over 80 per cent of farm labour. Superstructure is determined by economic basis. This highly intensive family farming developed Confucianism that institutionalised a patriarchal, patrilineal, and patrilocal family system. Filial piety was highly valued as the foundation of virtue and the root of civilisation. For nearly 2,000 years, Confucianism was the dominant cosmology, political philosophy, and the doctrine of proper ethics and comportment of the Chinese people. Understandably, supported by intensive family farming and enhanced by the filial piety-centred social norms, the elderly in rural China traditionally enjoyed a relatively high status at home and in the society.

Like most parts of China, as discussed in Chapter 3, the study area of Pingling and Nanshangzhao has been subject to a series of drastic social and economic experiments since 1949. During the last two decades of reform, the region was further exposed to an accelerated process of modernisation. These new developments have greatly influenced the local economy, and people's daily life, and, not least, the economic well-being and social status of the elderly. Nothing has been more obvious than the effect on the two major factors for which old people were valued in traditional agrarian economy: the

present-day elderly were not only deprived of private land rights, but also unable to amass sizeable resources after the collectivisation; their knowledge and skills of agricultural production became increasingly irrelevant in both the pre-reform and post-reform periods. They thus became a unique group in the status study.

Land is undoubtedly the most important resource of the rural economy. A striking effect of the state socialism that differentiates China from other developing countries is the guarantee of access to land for all farmers. The Land Reform of the early 1950s sent both landlords and the landless poor into the history books. Since then, private land ownership only existed for a short period. In the mid-1950s, land came under collective or community ownership¹¹. Other major production resources, such as draught animals and large farming equipment, were also collectivised. Left to the family were only a small private plot for growing vegetables, small farming tools, the house and other household belongings. With family farming changed to communal farming, the family ceased to be a production unit, remaining largely a consumption unit. The labour input of family members to the communal production was almost the family's only income source. The production team guaranteed all villagers a basic portion of staple food and some daily necessities. This egalitarian distribution system prevented rural people from falling into absolute poverty or hunger, but it also prevented them from accumulating sizeable personal savings and assets.

Participant 1: People were pitifully poor in the commune times. Ten workpoints (equal to one day's work of a strong labourer) hardly valued one *Yuan*, barely to buy ten *Jin* (1/2 kilogram) maize!

Participant 2: Even maize was not always sufficient. The big problem was no cash money.

Participant 3: Cash? Thank goodness if the family did not owe the team workpoints¹².

¹¹ In China, collectivisation in rural areas does not equal nationalisation. In theory, land is not owned by the state.

¹² It was not unusual that, at the time of end-of-season distribution, some families could not gather enough workpoints in the previous season to pay for the family grain ration, particularly those with a large number of dependants. They had to make up the outstanding points in the next season.

Participant 4: Cash was really the problem. People sometimes even had no money to buy a box of matches. If one had no relatives in cities sending money back, the only hope was private plot (by selling products from private plots on the free market).

Participant 3: The free market was banned later on. Be careful if you wanted to sell something, the commune cadres would come to cut off your 'capitalist tail' (*zibezhuyi weiba*)¹³! (Focus discussion group, elderly males)

In the study area, as remembered by old people, the income of rural people during the commune period was low, and their living standard was not much better than a bare subsistence. After paying for basic daily necessities, farmers had little left for savings. The most valuable private property of a family was perhaps its house, usually made of mud bricks. The value of such houses ranged between 2,000 and 3,000 *Yuan*. More strikingly, this low living standard was 'evenly' distributed: there were neither wealthy families nor the extremely poor.

Two factors, low income level and limited economic freedom, were crucial in hindering the current old people from achieving over their working life financial security for their families as well as for themselves in old age. As Zweig (1997) concluded from the statistics of the 1970s, the overall income level of rural people in China was only about one fifth to one sixth of that of urban dwellers. Under the rigid commune system, agricultural production almost stagnated. Commune officials failed to run the economy effectively, and peasants had no interest in promoting productivity, either. Worse still, the government imposed a policy of large price scissors between industrial and agricultural products, to facilitate capital accumulation for industrial development. Peasants' income was kept artificially low through the state monopoly in purchasing and marketing agricultural products (*tonggou tongxiao*). In the meantime, rural people chafed at the many restrictions on personal freedom: they were confined to their village by the household registration (*hukou*) system and could not look for work and higher income elsewhere; private production was discouraged through limitations on private plots and

¹³ The 'capitalist tail' is a frequent term in government documents during the Cultural Revolution period, referring to all types of private economic activities that the government discouraged.

other household sidelines (such as poultry and pigs); private exchange was kept in bounds through the banning or strict control of free markets. In the 20 years from the early 1950s to the early 1970s, China's total product of industry increased by over ten times, whereas that of agriculture increased by only two times, just keeping up with population growth. At an annual rate of just 1 per cent, little progress was made in living standard improvement in rural areas (Meisner, 1996). The slogan of 'common prosperity' under the commune system turned out to be an unexpected situation of 'common poverty'.

Under the household contract system of the early 1980s, land in rural areas was reallocated to the families. In Nanshangzhao, for example, the total farm land of 130 hectares was contracted to 275 families, with each family holding 0.2 to 0.8 hectares. Now that families have the right of land use up to 30 years, some researchers prefer to describe the current land ownership as *de facto* private (Kelliher, 1992). In theory, however, land in rural China is still considered as community property. Farmers have the use right, but not the eventual ownership. That means land is not for sale. Sub-contract of plots between villagers is only allowed at the approval of the villagers' committee, the nominal land owner. On the other hand, land plots are contracted to a family, not to a specific person. The household head has to consult with the villagers' committee before making any decisions on land inheritance (or more precisely, contract inheritance). Therefore, even under the current family farming, the elderly cannot reclaim land ownership.

As in most societies that are experiencing an accelerated process of modernisation, old people in rural China have found that the value of their knowledge and skills in traditional farming is quickly diminishing. In fact, their knowledge and skills were abruptly devalued by the collectivisation a few decades ago. During the commune period, as discussed in Chapter 3, major decisions about agricultural production and rural management were made by commune officials in line with prevailing government policies. Team cadres were responsible for fulfilling commune plans at the village level. They had little power even to adjust the plans to local land or weather conditions. It was not uncommon that crops failed because of officials' bad planning or mismanagement. In such

a rigid system, peasants, young and old, had no part in deciding what they were supposed to do. On the other hand, knowledge and skills acquired from family farming were not necessarily useful for communal farming where peasant groups worked on expanded land plots.

The reform of the early 1980s has helped revitalise the family's function as a production unit with a return to family farming. Farmers are now responsible for their own production and management. They have to work hard not only to cultivate the land intensively and carefully, but also to expand their income generating activities to other non-agricultural sectors. However, family farming in the 1990s is not the same as in the 1950s. In the study area, as discussed in Chapter 3, rural economy has gradually moved from a single farming economy to a diversified economy. The use of machines and modern technology, such as chemical fertilisers and pesticides, became increasingly popular, and more and more people found jobs in wage employment.

Uncle Chen Wenfa is an old man in his late 60s. He and his wife live with their older son's family. The family has two plots, one for growing wheat and maize, and the other for apple trees. All major decisions about farming are made by his son, who is now the household head. Asked if he has ever made any advice to his son, Uncle Chen is a little upset, saying that nowadays few young people are willing to listen to old people. They think what old people know is outdated. 'They (young people) buy new varieties of crops at the seed shop, and prefer to ask for advice from people in the technology station'. Uncle Chen quite supports his son using more new technology. For example chemical fertiliser is thought 'simple, clean and effective', compared with the old style farmyard manure. However, he feels he himself is too old to learn. 'I am not useful any more. I can't even understand clearly what the directions say. What if you get the formula wrong? The entire crop will be ruined' (Field work notes).

Under the new circumstances, as can be seen, old people have realised that their knowledge and skills of traditional farming are no longer very useful. Nevertheless, I found that few old people in the study area were eager to learn new technology. Lack of education is of course a major handicap. Another reason may be psychological barriers. Old people viewed new technology with a mixture of respect and fear: it is effective in raising the yield, but is not something that old people can grasp.

4.3. Economic well-being of the elderly

As mentioned above, the economic aspect of the elderly's status is referred to as their economic well-being. To compare the possible differences in the well-being of the elderly, Rudkin (1993) suggested the both absolute and relative assessments should be involved. While assessment of absolute well-being employs a standard set by the researcher, an assessment of relative well-being uses that of other people as the standard. In this study, well-being is discussed largely as a relative concept: the well-being of the elderly before and after the reform, and the well-being of the elderly in relation to other family members.

In previous literature, particularly in industrialised countries, personal monetary income has often been used as a key indicator to assess the economic well-being of the elderly. However, this indicator is not readily applicable in rural China. At present, most rural people are not engaged in wage employment, and co-residence with children is the main form of living arrangements of the elderly. It is difficult, if not entirely impossible, to find an accurate indicator that can clearly separate the well-being of the elderly from that of other family members. It is also difficult to compare with accurate indicators the well-being of the current elderly with those in the commune period some 20 years ago, because of lack of reliable data. Most discussions in this sector, therefore, are based on information gathered through qualitative techniques, such as observations, in-depth interviews and focus group discussions.

4.3.1. Improved living standard of villagers as a whole

During the commune period, as mentioned above, the living standard of families in the study area was very low. Since the reform of the late 1970s, the per capita annual income has increased by about four times from less than 300 *Yuan* to over 1,200 *Yuan* in the mid-1990s. Great improvement has been made in every aspect of village life. Old

people also benefited a lot from the reform along with other segments of local population. The Chinese commonly use '*yi shi zhu xing*' (clothing, food, housing and transport) to generalise people's daily needs. Here four categories of food, clothing, housing and household appliances are used to discuss detailed changes occurred in the study area.

'*Min yi shi wei tian*' (Food is the first necessity of the people) is a centuries-old folk saying in China. No wonder food was given the top priority because the majority of the Chinese population has been under constant threat of hunger and poverty for thousands of years. Even to this date, the popular greeting rural people exchange with each other is not 'Good morning' or 'Good evening', but 'Have you had your meal?' Therefore, the most evident proof of the improvement in living standard is the quantity and quality of food rural people consume nowadays. As discussed in Chapter 3, the study area is located in a grain-producing region of the Guanzhong plain, and the staple food of local people consists of wheat and maize. During the commune period, grain was distributed by the production team on a per capita basis. The amount of the grain ration differed from year to year, about 200 kilograms depending on the total production and tax in-kind burden. In an average year, wheat made up one third of the ration and maize two thirds. A small amount of rapeseeds was also distributed as a source of edible oil. Although the ration was sufficient to keep villagers from starving, it could not ensure that everybody was well fed. Families had to make full use of their private plots to produce more non-staple foods as supplements, such as sweet potatoes, turnips and pumpkins. In spring, there were usually families suffering from the pre-harvest food shortage. Since the reform, not only has food quantity increased, food quality also has improved. Now families are free to grow and store as much grain as they need. During my fieldwork, there was no sign of food shortage before the wheat harvest in early June. The coarse foods like maize and sweet potatoes had almost disappeared from people's diet. Old people were especially happy that they could have three meals a day of refined grain like wheat. An old informant told, during the commune period people did not have sufficient to eat, even working hard from morning till night. Now, every family is selling grain to the state. Once food is ample, fewer disputes occur at home. In the study area, the pattern of food

consumption has also diversified. In addition to what they grew on the farm, villagers bought increasingly more food from the market, such as rice, vegetables and meat. I was surprised to find that a street pedlar came every day to sell fresh vegetables in Nanshangzhao. It is clear that the cash income at rural people's disposal has increased as the local agricultural production becomes gradually specialised and monetised. An interesting and useful benchmark for measuring sufficiency and food quality in the study area is whether the family consumed or sold the eggs of their few chickens. During the commune period, eggs were commonly sold for cash on the market, because the production team rarely distributed cash to families. For those with no relatives remitting money from outside, selling eggs was almost the family's only source of cash income, particularly to buy small necessities like matches, kerosene and tea. Another major source of cash income was raising one pig or two in the farmyard. However, the relatively large amount of cash income from selling pigs was usually devoted to more important purposes, such as purchasing farm tools or repairing houses. Since the reform, villagers still kept a few chickens at home, but mainly for self-consumption. Even pigs were largely not for sale. In fact, the number of families raising pigs were declining. Few young couples raised pigs nowadays. I was told that pig raising was labour and time consuming, and did not make much profit.

'Fo yao jin zhuang, ren yao yi zhuang' (Buddha is adorned with gold, and man with clothing) is an old Chinese folk saying indicating the necessity of clothing in people's daily life. Before the 1980s, China had to maintain a cloth ration system for more than two decades to keep its population from cold. Under this system, each person was entitled to an annual coupon for about three metres of woven fabrics. In the study area, however, most villagers wore handwoven clothes. As discussed previously, cotton is widely grown in the region. The production team distributed a small amount of raw cotton to families after fulfilling government production plans. Handloomed cloth was considered tough to stand wear and tear. On the other hand, a lot of families simply had no money to materialise the ration entitlement¹⁴. The elderly told me that, during the commune period,

¹⁴ The cloth ration was just an entitlement, not in kind.

people just had a few garments for changes, and everybody wore black or dark blue. There was little difference between men and women, children and adults. Since the reform the cloth ration system has been abolished. People's clothing becomes increasingly variegated and colourful, thanks to two factors. First, textile products, especially made from chemical and synthetic fibres, are now much cheaper and readily available on the market. Second, rural people can afford to buy more ready-made clothes because of increased income. The traditional looms have totally disappeared from rural families. In the study area, I observed little difference in people's clothing from that in urban areas. Although some old people still wore home-made, dark-coloured clothes, children and young people were all wearing colourful, ready-made ones bought from the market.

'De qian de li, zhi fang zhi di' (making money and profit, adding house and land) was a local saying in the study area in old times, when most of people's spare money went to building houses or buying land. Since land is not purchasable under the current system, villagers began to renovate their houses with great enthusiasm as soon as they had some savings after the reform. Over the last two decades, the study area has witnessed two building booms. The first was in the mid-1980s when many of the old plastered mud houses were torn down and replaced by brick masonry structures. The second was since the mid-1990s when one- and two-storey reinforced concrete structures became popular. In the newly planned resident quarter of Nanshangzhao, most houses are two-storey concrete structures. Along both sides of the village lanes there were piles of construction materials, such as cement floorslabs, bricks and tiles, suggesting that those who had not yet rebuilt intended to do so soon. Particularly striking was the new focus on home ornamentation. Houses built in the mid-1980s were large and functional, while those built in the mid-1990s displayed personal taste. Many houses were decorated with fancy tile outwork or mosaic, such as tiles of flowers and Chinese characters adorning the entrance. After electricity was connected in the late 1970s, a running water system was completed in the late 1980s with the village's own welfare fund. In recent years, the local government has launched a double-renovation program to popularise energy-saving cooking stoves

and hygienic toilets. In housing conditions, people in the study area were not much worse off than city dwellers.

Twenty years ago, the so-called three big items of watch, radio and bicycle were the most admired household appliances in rural China. Now, the three big items have changed to TV set, washing machine and refrigerator. In the study area, the three old big items could be found in almost every family, so that it became no longer meaningful to use them as indicators of a family's possessions. On the other hand, washing machines and refrigerators are still not widely used. In the household survey, only ownership of a TV set was used to measure the family's living condition. Of the 284 households interviewed, 62 per cent had a TV set: 12.1 per cent colour, and 47.9 per cent black and white. For young couples preparing for marriage, a TV set was an essential item on their shopping list. Another striking change was people's style of beds. In most old houses people still slept on the *Kang*, a traditional brick bed. In most new houses, in contrast, the *Kang* was replaced by wooden beds, or even comfortable mattresses.

4.3.2. Economic well-being of the elderly in relation to younger generations

Compared with the commune period, old people's economic well-being greatly improved after the reform. However, this does not necessarily mean that old people enjoyed exactly the same level of well-being as other segments of the population. In the study area, as suggested by both quantitative and qualitative information, the economic well-being of the elderly was somewhat lower than that of younger generations in the community or at home.

Based on the household survey data, Table 4.1 shows a comparison of households in three forms of living arrangements of the elderly: elderly-only households, households with at least one co-resident elderly member aged 60 and over, and households with no co-resident elderly. The living standard panel is divided into four categories according to the family's level of per capita monthly income: poor, average, well-to-do and wealthy. At

the present stage, most families in the study neither had a regular source of monetary income nor kept a strict household account. The respondents were only asked to choose a category that most suited their own situation. The income range of each category served as a rough benchmark. For example, the average level was set at the range 50-99 *Yuan*, because the official figure of Pingling Township was about 85 *Yuan* in 1995. Obviously, the household living standard here is used only as an approximate indicator of the elderly's economic well-being, because it cannot clearly explain how old people are treated within the family.

In the study area, as shown in the survey results, old people were more likely to live in a poor or average household. While the elderly only group accounted for 9.8 per cent of the total households interviewed, it made up 40 per cent of all poor households. Nearly one third of the elderly-only group fell into the poor category, and none was classified as wealthy. The households with co-resident elderly were better off. Although the majority (71.1 per cent) believed that their living standard was at the average level, 24.8 per cent considered themselves as well-to-do or wealthy. The proportion of households classified as poor was the lowest (4.1 per cent) among the three groups. Households with no co-resident elderly tended to enjoy a higher living standard, judged by the level of per capita monthly income. They had the lowest proportion in the average category (63.0 per cent) and the highest proportion in both the well-to-do (23.0 per cent) and wealthy (8.9 per cent) categories. However, their proportion in the poor category (5.2 per cent) was slightly higher than that of the co-residence group. A close check-up of the survey results suggested that it might be partially attributable to the number of dependent children. Of the seven poor families in the young-adult-only group, two had four children and one had three.

Data in the other two panels in Table 4.1 also show a similar pattern. Judging by their housing conditions, the elderly-only group had the lowest proportion (17.9 per cent) living in concrete houses, and the highest (82.1 per cent) in houses built of other materials, including mud and burnt bricks. In comparison, over half of the young-adult-only group

and over one third of the co-residence group were in the concrete category. The majority of the elderly-only group (89.3 per cent) did not possess a TV set at home. In the other two groups, families with no TV accounted for only about a third, 34.7 per cent in the co-residence group and 30.4 per cent in the young-adult-only group. The comparison is particularly striking in the colour TV category. While colour TV was found in one fifth of the young adult only households, there was none in the elderly-only households.

Table 4. 2: Distribution of households by living arrangements and selected indicators of economic well-being, Pingling, 1996

Item	Elderly only		Co-residence		Young adult only	
	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.
A. Living standard (per head monthly income in <i>Yuan</i>)						
Poor (<50)	28.6	8	4.1	5	5.2	7
Average (50-99)	67.9	19	71.1	86	63.0	85
Well-to-do (100-199)	3.6	1	20.7	25	23.0	31
Wealthy (200+)	0.0	0	4.1	5	8.9	12
B. Housing quality						
Concrete structures	17.9	5	35.5	43	52.6	71
Others	82.1	23	64.5	78	47.4	64
C. Possession of TV sets						
Colour TV	0.0	0	9.9	12	20.7	28
Black-white TV	10.7	3	55.4	63	48.9	66
No TV	89.3	25	34.7	42	30.4	41
Total	100.0	28	100.0	121	100.0	135

Source: Household survey data.

The comparison based on the indicators displayed in Table 4.1 provides only a general pattern of the economic well-being of people living in various arrangements. Here attention should be paid to the difference between the living standard judged by income level and that by housing condition and TV possession. While income level reflects largely the family's current situation at the time of the survey, the other two indicators also involve the family's accumulated assets. In the study area, the new houses where young couples lived were not necessarily built by their own resources. In many cases, parents and other relatives also made contributions in money, materials or labour. According to an old tradition in the Guangzhong plain, parents had two major responsibilities for each male successor: to arrange a marriage and build a house. The adult sons had likewise two major

responsibilities: to support parents in old age and arrange the funeral when they die. In reality, however, few parents could afford to build each son a house single-handed. If the family could accumulate enough money when the boys were still young, it was natural to renovate the family house first. Otherwise, the family had to pool all their resources and built a house for the son who first got married and moved out to form his own family. Quite often, the elderly parents continued to live in the old house with other unmarried children. The possession of a TV set told a similar story. After their basic necessities were met, people also increased their interest in a more colourful social and cultural life. For young people in the study area, a TV set was not only a symbol of status, but also an indispensable part of daily life. A TV set was high on their shopping list when money was available¹⁵. For the newly wed couples, it was almost an embarrassment if there was not a TV set in their dowries. As a result, people of the young-adult-only group were more likely to live in new houses and possess a TV set.

In the co-residence households, there are also evident differences in economic well-being between the elderly and the young. Generally speaking, the difference in food was minimal. What varied markedly was clothing and articles of daily use. Old people commonly wore old-style, home-made clothes in dark colours, while young people wore mostly modern, ready-made clothes. The clothes of young girls and children were especially colourful. Home-made shoes were still popular among the elderly, but no longer wanted by young people who preferred to buy shoes at the market. An interesting comparison is the furniture used in the household. While rooms of elderly couples were simple and only had a few pieces of old furniture, those of young people were usually filled with fashionable beds, desks and wardrobes, and decorated with novel ornaments. Obviously, the quality of life was slightly different for the two generations, even within the same family. From my observation, old people seemed to have very few extra material needs of their own. Apart from some small items like tea and cigarettes, the most cash the family spent for old people was on health care and medicine. Comparably, the elderly believed that young people and children spent a lot more.

¹⁵ The sharp drop in TV prices in recent years was another contributing factor.

Participant 1: Young people nowadays are really big spenders. They like whatever they set eyes on.

Participant 2: That's because more and more are available. Before there was little you could buy even if you had money.

Participant 3: Who cares if the young spend what they have earned themselves!

Participant 4: Kids don't make money, but they cost even more.

Participant 5: Kids now are not like before. They are more expensive.

Participant 1: It is OK to spend money on kids. But I think young people should be more budget-conscious. You may need money tomorrow. Who knows? (Focus discussion group, elderly males)

Certainly, the differences in quality of life among family members cannot be explained simply as differences in treatment. Sometimes, they were caused by differences in attitude and habits. Old people in the study area seemed quite satisfied with their current situation, as described by an old saying '*zhi zu chang le*' (A contented mind is a perpetual feast). As Nayar (1996) observed, past experience and expectations for future seem to be important ingredients in being satisfied with present life among old people. Asked about their personal experience, old people loved to make comparisons between now and the past, rather than between themselves and the young. Most frequently mentioned was the hard life during the 'period of severe natural disasters' from 1959 to 1961. For old people, being content and humble was considered a virtue, compared to excessive pleasure-seeking. Although many old people lived frugally themselves, few openly complained of the life style that young people admired. Actually, they were happy to see that younger generations were enjoying a better life than they had. Their only concern was that money was spent on reasonable purposes and in a planned way.

4.4. Social status of the elderly

As mentioned above, the status of the elderly was high in the traditional Chinese society. Economically, this was attributable to the resources and knowledge old people controlled in a highly developed intensive agriculture. In reality, the economic well-being of the elderly was not necessarily different from others because of the widespread poverty, famine and war that long prevailed in rural China. However, it was believed that the social status of the elderly was relatively high, because of the existence of a patriarchal, patrilineal, and patrilocal family system and the filial piety-centred social norms of Confucianism (Baker, 1979). For example, elderly household heads or parents were the major decision makers in the management of the household economy, division or inheritance of family properties, and children's marriage and careers.

In previous literature there are few well established indicators to assess the social status of the elderly, particularly in developing countries. Also, the difference between the status of the elderly in the family and that in the community has not been sufficiently addressed, although the two are usually interrelated. Rudkin (1992) proposed four major indicators based on her study in Java: respect for the elderly, importance of consulting the elderly, community organisation membership, and giving advice regarding marriage. These indicators have been reframed for collecting relevant information in this study. In the household survey of this study, two questions were related to the elderly's social status: household head status and the role in major decision-making process in the family. The questionnaire used in the household survey in this study, as discussed in Chapter 2, is relatively simple and concise. A major handicap of using survey data to examine the social status of the elderly in the study area is the difficulty to understand the attitudes and experience of both older and younger generations. Information collected through qualitative techniques in Nanshangzhao Village is discussed in this section to show more insight into the social status issue from the changes in parents' role in children's marriage arrangements.

4.4.1. Household headship among the elderly and their influence in decision-making

Obviously, being considered as a household head is closely related to the person's status in the family. In traditional rural China, as Baker (1979) concluded, the household head was usually the oldest male in the family who controlled the household's resources and major decision making. The head had a great deal of power over other members of the household. In him was vested all the family property, and he alone could dispose of it. There were also a series of political, social, economic and religious responsibilities household heads had to perform in the community. In contemporary China, however, household headship is not necessarily decided by a person's sex or seniority under the more institutionalised household registration system. For the person registered as the head in a household, there are no strict requirements at present. It depends primarily on the family's own choice. In most circumstances, a household head is the major bread-winner, the major decision-maker, or the major person that can be contacted publicly in the family. However, it is possible that, in some cases, a person was only nominally recorded as the head, regardless of his actual status at home. In the household survey of this study, a household head refers to the person so registered on the household registration card.

Of 284 households interviewed in Pingling Township, as displayed in Table 4.3, the majority (80.3 per cent) were headed by persons under 60 years of age. Those headed by old people over 60 accounted for about one fifth. Compared with their share of 25.4 per cent in the total adult population aged 18 and over in the households surveyed, the headship rate of the elderly (21.9 per cent) was lower by about three percentage points. Evidently, the traditional pattern that only old people could qualify for household head status has shifted in favour of younger family members. Household heads were still predominantly male, 82.9 per cent among young adults and 83.9 among the aged. However, the fact that a sizeable proportion of women (16.9 per cent) were registered as household heads indicates an improvement of women's status in the family, particularly among the younger generation.

Table 4. 3: Distribution of household head, by sex and age group, Pingling, 1996

Age group	Sex					
	Male		Female		All	
	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.
18-59	80.1	189	81.3	39	80.3	228
60+	19.9	47	18.7	9	19.7	56
Total	100.0	236	100.0	48	100.0	284

Source: Household survey data.

The criterion for households selected for this study was whether the family had any living old parents or relatives, not necessarily co-resident. Of the 284 households surveyed, 149 households had at least one co-resident elderly person. Obviously, it is somewhat misleading to include families with no co-resident elderly person in the discussion of household head status of the elderly. If only the 149 households with co-resident elderly persons are taken into account, as shown in Table 4.4, the proportion of households headed by old persons increased to 37.6 per cent. However, if the factor of household type is considered, a few more interesting patterns can be observed. The proportion of the elderly being household heads decreased as the number of generations in a family increased. Of the 26 one-generation households, 25 (96.2 per cent) were headed by old persons. Since these households were composed primarily of old single people or couples, it is natural that the household heads were the elderly themselves. Of the 13 two-generation households with elderly parents and their unmarried children, 61.5 per cent were headed by old people. Three-generation households were the most popular form of household structure in Table 4.4, accounting for over two thirds of the total. Commonly, elderly parents lived with a married son and his family. In this category, just 21.8 per cent were headed by old persons. It seems that adult children were more likely to become household heads after marriage. In the study area, a small number of households consisted of four generations. Of the nine households in this category, only one was headed by an old person. It is interesting to note that the proportion of elderly-headed households in the most popular three-generation households (21.8 per cent) was surprisingly close to that observed in all households surveyed (19.7 per cent). Therefore, it is plausible to conclude

that the status of the elderly within families was no longer as important as in old times, judging by their household head status.

The decision-making power of a person is associated with his status in the family. In the household survey, two questions examined old persons’ decision-making on major household activities of adult children: the question on purchase of durable household appliances, such as TV sets, radios or bicycles, addressed mainly consumption issues, and that on management of the household economy, such as farming on the family plot, focused mainly on production issues. Originally, there were two additional questions in this panel: on old people’s role in decisions about house building and marriage arrangement. In the pretest of the questionnaire, it was found that such activities were so infrequent that to keep them in the questionnaire could not guarantee any meaningful results. These two questions were later dropped from the household survey, and used mainly in the outline for focus-group discussions.

Table 4. 4: Distribution of household head, by age group and household type, in household with persons aged 60+, Pingling, 1996

Age group	Household type									
	1-generation		2-generation		3-generation		4-generation		All	
	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.
18-59	3.8	1	38.5	5	78.2	79	88.9	8	62.4	93
60+	96.2	25	61.5	8	21.8	22	11.1	1	37.6	56
Total	100.0	26	100.0	13	100.0	101	100.0	9	100.0	149

Source: Household survey data.

The information provided in Table 4.5 comes from the 101 three-generation households with at least one co-resident old person. Households in other categories were not included because of difficulties in making comparisons or small sample size. For example, there is no point in considering the one-generation households where almost all members were aged. As shown in Panel A, in households headed by old persons, major decisions were more likely to be made by elderly parents than by adult children. In about two thirds of households, elderly parents had a final say in purchasing household durables (68.2 per cent) and managing the household economy (63.6 per cent). In other third of

households, adult children would make decisions. In contrast, an obvious role exchange can be observed in Panel B, when it comes to households with adult children as heads. In the majority of these households, the adult children made the final decision, 93.7 per cent in purchasing household durables and 94.9 per cent in managing the household economy. Old people remained influential only in a small proportion of households. Despite the relatively small sample size covered by Table 4.5, it reflects to some extent the pattern and trend of the elderly's social status in the study area. Household headship can still be used as a rough indicator of the elderly's status in the family. As long as old people remained household heads, they were more likely to maintain influence and power in decision-making. However, adult children had already taken over the real power in a sizeable proportion of families of which the elderly were still registered as nominal heads. Once the household headship was formally passed to adult children, most of the elderly's power in decision-making was gone. There was little difference between the elderly's role in decisions concerning consumption matters and production matters.

Table 4. 5: Distribution of major decision-maker in three-generation households, by age of household heads and activity, Pingling, 1996

Activity	Major decision-maker					
	Elderly parents		Adult children		Total	
	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.
A. Households with head aged 60+						
Purchasing household durables	68.2	15	31.8	7	100.0	22
Managing household economy	63.6	14	36.4	8	100.0	22
B. Households with head aged under 60						
Purchasing household durables	6.3	5	93.7	74	100.0	79
Managing household economy	5.1	4	94.9	75	100.0	79

Source: Household survey data.

This finding largely matches the conclusion made by CASS Population Centre in their 1987 survey (Tian, 1988) that only a small proportion (18.7 per cent) of the rural elderly had decisive power in economic matters of the family. In comparison, nearly half of the urban elderly (49.5 per cent) were still influential in making major decisions. The reason lies in the crucial urban-rural differences in the mode of production. In cities, wage

earning was the norm, and the majority of the elderly were covered by pension programs. In rural areas, by contrast, income was generated mainly through manual labour. Ageing parents became less productive over time, so their power in the family declined, as shown through the transfer of headship to adult children.

4.4.2. Influence of the elderly in children's marriage arrangements

As noted above, nowhere more than in traditional China has the high status of the elderly been institutionalised in the Confucian norm of filial piety. The Chinese character for filial piety, '*xiao*', is composed of two parts: the upper stands for 'old' and the lower for 'son' or 'child'. This can be interpreted as children being subject to parents, or what children owe to their parents. Once they became adults, children were obliged to fulfil various duties of piety affiliated to them by tradition. Three fundamental duties were frequently mentioned: to give birth to a son to continue the family line between ancestors and descendants, to provide for the parents in their old age, and to show respect and obedience to the elderly parents. In Confucian classics filial piety is valued as the root of both virtue and morality. Respect for parents should be extended to all seniors: Mencius, an ancient scholar, taught that one should honour the aged relatives of other people as if they were one's own. (Chao, 1983).

Because of its short history, as discussed in Chapter 3, Nanshangzhao is not a traditional single-lineage village where all the males are descended on their father's side from a single common ancestor, but a village with people of several different origins and clans living together, mainly from the Lius, Chens and Zhangs. In the village there were neither the strong clan organisations nor the dominating clan heads frequently observed in single-lineage villages in rural China, so, the traditional institutions that reinforced Confucian values like filial piety were weak. The social norms that support the high status of the elderly were more usually observed by individuals under peer pressure.

Generally, the traditional requirements for young people to respect the elderly were not as strictly observed in Nanshangzhao as in a single-lineage village. This was clearly reflected by the way young people addressed the elderly in the village. In Chinese society, there are strict rules for addressing people according to their status at home, their position in the society, the interpersonal relationship, and the context. In a single-lineage village where people are from the same clan, each person has a fixed position in the kinship system based on his age, sex, marriage status and seniority. People usually address each other by specific clan names corresponding to their positions and relationships. Because such kinship systems are very complicated, the Chinese have developed also a very complicated clan name system¹⁶. To address an old person by his personal name, instead of his clan name, is considered impolite and ill-mannered. For example, the village where I spent two years with my classmates from Xi'an in the early 1970s was a typical single-lineage village. All villagers belong to the same Yan clan¹⁷. For us as outsiders, it was strange to see a few teenagers being called as 'uncle' by people much older than they were. Also unthinkable for us, educated at school in the communist doctrine of the class struggle, was that an elderly landlord, an 'enemy of the people', was always addressed by young people in a respectful way. In Nanshangzhao, however, there were no such strict rules on using clan names, because most people were not directly related.

Most young people still considered it proper to address the elderly with the general terms of 'uncle' or 'aunt', no matter whether they were directly related or not. A particular man was usually called 'uncle' plus his personal name, or people were indirectly addressed by reference to their child's name, such as 'Daqiang's father' or 'Daqiang's mother'. However, some old people complained that it was not unusual to be called by young people directly by their personal names. In fact, old people were very sensitive to

¹⁶ For example, 'uncle' in English may be translated into at least nine sets of names: *bofu* (elderly brothers of ego's father), *shufu* (younger brothers of ego's father), *jiufu* (brothers of ego's mother), *gufu* (brothers-in-law of ego's father), *yifu* (brothers-in-law of ego's mother), *tangshu* (paternal cousins of ego's father), *biaoshu* (maternal cousins of ego's father), *tangjiu* (paternal cousins of ego's mother), *biaojiu* (maternal cousins of ego's mother). In each set of these names, persons can be further identified according to their seniority by an additional prefix like *da* (first), *er* (second) or *san* (third).

¹⁷ Because I myself have the same surname, the villagers usually gave me special treatment as one of their relatives, different from my classmates

the way they were addressed in public. Perhaps for careless young people there was nothing wrong in using personal names, but for the elderly in question it seemed disrespectful. 'In old times, we dared not to be that free and blatant. The elderly would give us a good scolding. Now young ones don't know how to behave sometimes. They watch TVs and movies, only to learn bad manners', an old man grumbled. A young informant told me that he never called old persons as 'uncle' if they did not get along well with his parents. Nevertheless, I found that personal names were used more to address the young old than the old old, and to address old men than old women. Girls and young women never called old persons by their personal names.

'*Bu xiao you san, wu hou wei da*' (Topping the three unfilial behaviours is the failure to provide the family with a descendant) is a traditional Chinese saying. No one could satisfy filial piety without marriage, the first step to having a child. Marriage was therefore considered first as a family matter, rather than a private matter confined only to the young man and woman involved. Being the major decision-makers in the family, the parents had absolute authority over their children's marriage, when and to whom. Frequently, the person in question was not consulted, and might only be informed after the arrangement had been made. Many men did not even see their bride until the wedding was over. Given the emphasis on family importance, young people had little free choice, but had to pin their hopes on '*fu mu zhi ming, mei shuo zhi yan*' (the parents' will and the match-maker's skill). For the parents, to arrange marriage for children was justifiable and necessary as part of their responsibility to secure the overall benefits of the family. In the meantime, their own authority, power and interest as seniors were also at stake. For the children, on the other hand, the marriage was not always tied by affection or in their own interest, but by duty to the family and parents. Whether the marriage itself was happy or successful became an issue of less importance. Not surprisingly, many marriages ended in failure, despite the parents' original good intentions.

After 1949, the government launched a series of mass campaigns to promote state socialist ideology, including the education programs of the new 1953 Marriage Law. As

part of the emancipation of women movement, free-choice marriage was encouraged to replace arranged marriage which was deemed as feudal and oppressive. The Law ruled that marriage should be negotiated by the individuals concerned without any interference or obstruction from third parties, usually from parents. Although not designed to discriminate against older people in general, the Law demanded that they should relinquish interference in their children's marriage, an important part of their authority and power over affairs within the domestic domain. With their power base at home gradually eroded, the status of the elderly also declined. As concluded by Croll (1981) from a number of case studies in the 1950s, parents frequently perceived the operation of free-choice marriage to be a direct attack on their authority. The young people's initiative in the marriage negotiations was commonly interpreted as a direct expression of disobedience or rebellion. Experiences over the last few decades show, however, that the substitution of free-choice marriage for arranged marriage was not an easy task. In the revised 1980 Marriage Law, the development of new marriage and family relations was still given top priority in the government's social reform agenda.

In the focus-group discussions of this study, the question was raised how the participants' marriage was negotiated: arranged by parents or initiated by themselves. Not surprisingly, almost all of the 13 elderly participants mentioned that their marriage was arranged. Here 'almost' means that the persons who made the arrangement were not necessarily the parents. One old man presumed that it was his grandfather's idea, and another believed his uncle played the major role after his father died. In comparison, none of the 14 young participants thought their marriage should be described as arranged. Instead, 11 agreed that their marriages were made possible by '*jieshao*' (introduction) through various persons: parents, relatives or friends, with their own consent. The other three, all young men, were glad to disclose that they dated their partners privately, before informing their parents for approval. It seems that young men in Nanshangzhao had more freedom in courting girls of their choice, or more courage to admit it in public.

Participant 1: My marriage was arranged by my parents when I was just 15. When they made the decision, That's it. '*Ziyou lianai*' (free-choice marriage) was never heard of at that time.

Participant 2: Who of us sitting here did not have his marriage arranged by parents? Not to mention the period before the Liberation (1949), free-choice marriage was rare even during the commune period! There are not many now, either.

Participant 3: It depends. In our times nobody dared to disobey the words of parents. Now young people do not always listen to you. They won't necessarily live under the same roof with the old after the marriage.

Participant 4: Free-choice marriage is what the (Communist) Party policy requires. However, it won't do if the opinions of the parents are ignored. Young people are prone to be carried away by their whims. What can you do with a wrong person as the rice is cooked (when the damage is done)?

Participant 5: Much worse for a young girl to act on her own! Even though she could file for divorce later, were the man not right, the gossip never ends. It brings disgrace to her parents.

Participant 1: As the saying goes: *bu ting laoren yan, chikui zai yanqian* (if one does not listen to the words of the old, suffering is before his eyes). All that we old people want is to do children good, anyway (Focus discussion group, elderly males).

Most of the old persons participating in the focus-group discussion got married in the late 1940s or the early 1950s before numerous ideology-motivated campaigns that attacked the 'feudalist and superstitious' values of Confucianism, including programs to popularise the new Marriage Law. Understandably, their marriages were almost entirely arranged by their parents or other senior members of the family. Asked about their experience in negotiating marriage for their own children, most old people admitted that they have played a certain part in decision-making, but none believed that they could single-handedly arrange marriage for their children nowadays. It was interesting to find that, after the decades-long propaganda of the government, '*baoban hunyin*' (arranged marriage) has become an embarrassing term of political incorrectness. When talking about betrothal and marriage, people in Nanshangzhao tended to use 'introduced marriage' rather than 'arranged marriage' in comparison to 'free-choice marriage'. Apart from the

political factor, there were two plausible reasons why arranged marriage was seldom mentioned nowadays. For old people, there were now few cases of arranged marriage in the original sense where they had the monopoly of control over the whole procedures. Young people, on the other hand, wanted to prove that they did enjoy a certain independence in choosing marriage partners, even when the marriage negotiation was initiated by parents.

It is evident that, in the study area, the influence of the parents on children's marriage was declining, as shown in the gradual shift from the old-style arranged marriage to the government-promoted, new free-choice marriage. However, while fully arranged marriage had almost disappeared, complete free-choice marriage was still not very popular, either. Compared with these two extreme situations, most marriages observed fell somewhere in between, frequently described as 'introduced marriage' that combined features of both the old and new patterns. This intermediate marriage pattern of introduced marriage had two variations. In the first instance, the parents took it upon themselves to initiate the marriage negotiations, and the young people were only later introduced to each other. However, parents no longer had the monopoly, and the marriage agreement was concluded with the consent of the young persons involved. If the consent was not forthcoming, parents could hardly proceed with the negotiation even if the mate they found for their child was thought to be the most suitable one. In the second instance, the young people selected their marriage partner, only to ask their parents for approval when certain progress had been made privately. That the young people took the initiative did not necessarily mean that they had personal contact at the beginning. They might also be introduced informally to each other by friends, classmates and relatives. In rural China, marriage was still considered a major family matter. It was almost never heard of in the study area that a young couple got married without the minimum consent of their parents. Such behaviour was often dismissed as irresponsible and unacceptable. As I observed, influence of the parents was stronger in the first variation of introduced marriage, particularly when the young person in question was a girl. In the second variation, parental influence was markedly weakened.

During my stay in Nanshangzhao, it happened that the village head, Mr. Liu Qingming, was organising the wedding ceremony for his youngest son of 21. The bride was also from a village cadre family in a neighbouring village. The two young people knew each other when studying in the same high school, but had little personal contact before because they were in different classes. In fact, the marriage negotiation was initiated by their fathers. The two fathers got acquainted at township government meetings. Although both men had expressed privately their interest in becoming '*qinjia*' (in-laws), they still asked their children about their opinions. 'Arranged marriage won't do nowadays, let alone for us village cadre families', said Mr. Liu. After the two young people agreed, according to the local custom, the Liu family still asked a respectable elder from the clan as a go-between to offer the bride's family a formal proposal (*tiquin*), together with gifts. Then the two young people, accompanied by their fathers, paid a formal visit to their future partner's family to get 'examined' (*xiangqin*). After a simple engagement procedure, the preparation for the formal wedding ceremony began. The Liu family was responsible for providing the bridal room, furniture and all expenses of the wedding reception, the bride's family for clothes and bedding. The wedding ceremony was held in Mr. Liu's house on the Labour Day of 1 May 1996, a public holiday. Eight large round tables, piled with food and drinks, were arranged in the courtyard for the reception. Invited were township cadres, all male clan seniors in the village, and relatives of the both families. Surprisingly, in addition to the marriage certificate, also announced at the ceremony was an old-age support contract (*shanyang laoren yiwu shu*), signed by the young couple and their parents, and certified by the villagers' committee. Although *kowtow* was long abolished, the young couple were asked to bow three times to their parents to show their gratitude. All elderly persons were offered repeatedly by the bridegroom and bride in turn wine and cigarettes as a gesture to show respect (Field-work note).

Obviously, Mr. Liu's case fell into the first variation of the popular introduced marriage: parents initiated and concluded the marriage negotiation with the consent of children. Three factors in this particular case of stronger parental influence deserve further discussion. First, Mr. Liu was himself influential not only as a household head at home, but also as a village head in the community. His initiative to get related through children's marriage to a likewise influential village cadre family might have been motivated by an intention to expand his own power base. Second, the young couple had much in common because of the similar family background. There might be no practical reasons to reject their parents' suggestions. And third, the young man was to a certain extent still dependent on his father. Almost all expense for the marriage was paid by the family, and

he had to live with his parents in the same house after marriage. This might dampen his willingness to disagree, if any.

4.5. Summary remarks

Obviously, studies on old-age security and support are not complete without an overall assessment of older people's life, frequently referred to as the status of the elderly. In the modernisation theory, however, the status of the elderly is not always clearly defined. For example, according to the version which implies an inverse linear relationship, the status of the elderly is lower in the more industrialised society. Does it mean that their economic well-being or quality of life also deteriorates? According to the version of the theory which posits a curvilinear relationship, on the other hand, the status of the elderly has improved as a result of the introduction of state welfare programs in developed societies. Does it mean that the elderly still enjoy a high level of social esteem and respect? In this study, to avoid possible confusions, economic well-being is used to describe the economic aspect of older people's overall situation, and social status the social aspect. So far, most arguments of the modernisation theory are based on observations in developed societies where societal transition has taken a relatively natural, gradual and complete course. Special caution is needed to compare or test the theory in a Third World setting like rural China, where the modernisation process has proven to be fast, turbulent and far from complete.

The status of the Chinese elderly was traditionally high. Theoretically, this was attributable to the resources and knowledge old people controlled in a highly developed intensive agriculture. In reality, the economic well-being of the elderly was not necessarily different from that of others because of the widespread poverty, famine and war that prevailed in China over hundreds of years. However, their social status at home and in community was consolidated by the extended family system and the filial piety-centred social norms of Confucianism.

Since the founding of the People's Republic in 1949, the government has imposed a series of ambitious social engineering programs according to the state socialist doctrine that drastically changed China's social and economic structures. In rural China, no social experiment has been so bizarre and destructive as the commune system (1958-1982). During the last two decades of reform, rural regions were further exposed to an accelerated process of modernisation. As people who have experienced all these externally-induced changes, the present-day elderly generation in rural China ended up as a unique group in the population: they suffered from poverty, war and famine and were deprived of education in their youth before 1949, they had limited opportunities to amass sizeable assets at their prime ages during the commune era, and now when the economy has been liberalised under the household responsibility system for making profits and getting rich, they are too old to take advantage of the new rules.

It is widely acknowledged that in the studies of people's status, a big problem is the lack of accurate historical comparisons and multi-dimensional indices to make any meaningful judgements about whether things are better or worse over time. This community-based study could not be spared from drawbacks due to data limitation. Information was gathered largely from the elderly's recollections and self-assessments, as well as this author's personal observation. In the study area it is evident that people's living standard has greatly improved after the reform since the late 1970s. Old people as part of the population also witnessed marked progress in their own economic well-being, compared with that during the commune period. However, this does not automatically lead to the conclusion that old people enjoyed the same level of well-being and quality of life as the younger generations at home or in the community. Old people were more likely to live in households of lower income, in poor housing conditions, and with no TV sets. What is worth noting is that old people were generally satisfied and content with their present life.

The government's campaigns against 'feudalist and superstitious' practices in rural China have greatly eroded the power and influence of old people at home and in the

community, since they seemed to embody the traditional values. In the study area, only a small number of old people still played an active role in the family, as household heads or major decision-makers. The influence of elderly parents on children's marriage arrangements was diminishing, shown by the popular 'introduced' marriage as a compromise between the traditional arranged marriage and the modern free-choice marriage. This resulted in the present-day elderly becoming the first generation in history to lose their monopoly in arranging marriages for their children. Among the elderly villagers, there was a common feeling that older persons are not as respected and influential as in the good old days.

Not surprisingly, findings from a community-based study like this one are far from sufficient to test any schools of the modernisation theory, particularly when they are abstracted from the unique experience of the present-day elderly. Nevertheless, a general trend was discernible in the study area: as the society becomes increasingly modernised, the importance of old people reduces. With inadequate economic security and declining status, the need of the present-day elderly for family support is understandably high.

CHAPTER 5

FAMILY SUPPORT FOR THE ELDERLY

5.1. Defining family support

Generally speaking, the needs of old people are the same as those of the rest of the population, such as food, clothing, housing, transport and health care. However, as they become dependent after withdrawing from productive activities because of age and frailty, old people are often subject to special needs for support. Care and support of the elderly are of major concern in rural China where there are no formal means of support and few public care institutions. In general, the family remains the principal provider of old-age support. The term 'family' is defined here narrowly as a group of persons with common ancestry: parents and their offspring, for two obvious reasons. First, household structures are commonly found in China to be confined to such groups. According to the 1992 survey on aged population, 95.1 per cent of all households in rural areas consisted of immediate family members only. Second, support given beyond the family is still limited. The same survey found that only 5.7 per cent of rural elderly were covered by pension programs (China Research Centre on Ageing, 1994). In this study, as noted in Chapter 1, the term 'family support' is preferred to 'household support', because non-resident family members also play a role in providing for the elderly.

Support provided for the elderly by family members can be roughly divided into three forms: economic, physical and emotional. Economic support includes monetary assistance, such as living allowances, remittances and pocket money, and material goods, such as food, clothing, medication and gifts. Physical support refers to the labour input in carrying out productive activities on and off the farm, maintaining the household, and nursing the elderly during illness or disability. Emotional support gives the elderly the feeling of being respected and cared for, and a sense of belonging within the household as well as the wider community. In this study, special emphasis is given to economic support for the elderly, although in reality the three forms of support are not mutually exclusive.

For example, working on elderly parents' contracted land plots can be seen not only as physical support, but also as a form of economic support through increased per unit yield. Additional remittances or small gifts to elderly parents on their birth day or at the Chinese New Year can be seen not only as material support, but also as a form of respect and affection from children, and thus a form of emotional support. Needless to say, caring for an old person during illness provides him or her with as much peace of mind as physical comfort. The most prominent aspect of family support and assistance in rural China is coresidence in which the elderly are supported in the form of shared housing, food and other necessities.

5.2. Living arrangements of the elderly

In both industrialised and developing countries, living arrangements of old people have become a major focus of research and received increasing policy attention. This is because the place in which the elderly live and the people with whom they live provide some indications of the amount of potential support available to the elderly. For example, elderly people living alone and without families will require their own financial resources, and extensive support if disabled. By contrast, coresidence with children even under circumstances of good health and economic independence of the elderly is viewed as a form of insurance against future uncertainties. This is particularly true in developing countries, as Martin (1988) observed that the majority of elderly Asians live in the same household as their offspring. Understandably, there are a number of benefits in coresidence, ranging from companionship and emotional support to the fulfilment of the physical and financial needs of parents and children. Adult children provide parents with financial support and physical care, while elderly parents offer help with childcare and housework. This is especially important when young women in the household work outside the home. Coresidence also economises on the cost of living. Parents and children can save money by living and eating together. Thus, 'economies of scale' and the ability to consume household 'public goods' provide an added incentive to coresidence (Lam, 1983). In rural China, the elderly traditionally continued to live in the house they had

occupied since early marriage and at least one child remained coresident. During much of the period of coresidence, an interdependent relationship developed with forms of support and assistance going in both directions between parents and children. Grandparents help in housework and caring for grandchildren, and adult children reciprocate by providing for the ageing parent's material and health care needs. Only as the health and physical ability of the elderly deteriorate eventually with age, does the balance of services start to flow gradually from the younger to the older generation. Of course, coresidence also has its drawbacks, such as a loss of privacy, and the diminished control of the elderly over household resources after adult children take over the headship. Da Vanzo and Chan (1994) identified a series of factors that might affect seniors' living arrangements. The number, ages, and gender composition of children available generally played a major role in decisions to coreside.

The discussion on living arrangements of the elderly in this study is primarily concerned with potential support from family members. Therefore, major attention is given to household structure, rather than to the probability of living with children, as observed in most living arrangement studies. Moreover, data collected from the small household survey do not allow detailed analysis. The term 'potential' should be stressed in the discussion here, because coresidence with children does not guarantee that old people's needs will be adequately met, and living independently is not evidence that their needs are not being met. To determine who the potential supporters are, households from the survey are divided into four groups by the number of generations in the household: one-generation, two-generation, three-generation and four-generation households. One-generation households consist of old people who lived either alone or with spouses. Two-generation households consist of old people and their children, unmarried or married. Three-generation households consist of old people, their children and grandchildren. Four-generation households consist of old people, their children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren. Obviously, the first two groups can also be classified as 'nuclear household', the last two as 'stem household'. Apart from the one-generation households, the three other groups can all be generalised as coresident households.

Table 5.1: Percentage distribution of old persons, by sex and household structure, Pingling, 1996

Household structure	Males		Females		All	
	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.
One-generation	22.2	22	16.5	19	19.2	41
Two-generation	11.1	11	8.7	10	9.8	21
Three-generation	63.6	63	70.4	81	67.3	144
Four-generation	30.0	3	4.3	5	3.7	8
Total	100.0	99	100.0	115	100.0	214

Source: Household survey data

Table 5.1 shows the percentage of old people in the study area living in the four household categories. Significant proportions (80.8 per cent) of the elderly resided with their offspring in the three forms of coresidence. About two-thirds of them were found in three-generation households. Overall, there was a slight tendency for elderly females rather than males to live with their children. In comparison, about one fifth of the elderly were living in one-generation households, alone or with a spouse.

Table 5.2: Percentage distribution of old persons, by sex and coresident family members, Pingling, 1996

Coresident family member	Males		Females		All	
	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.
Alone	2.0	2	2.6	3	2.3	5
Spouse only	20.2	20	13.9	16	16.8	36
Spouse and/or unmarried children	8.1	8	5.2	6	6.5	14
Spouse and/or a married son	54.5	54	65.2	75	60.3	129
Spouse and/or a married daughter	11.1	11	9.6	11	10.3	22
Spouse and/or others	4.0	4	3.5	4	3.7	8
Total	100.0	99	100.0	115	100.0	214

Source: Household survey data

A further look into the data reveals, as shown in Table 5.2, that among the old people in one-generation households, five were living alone and others were with a spouse. Old persons living by themselves deserve special attention, because their daily

needs may not be sufficiently met in the prevailing familial system of old-age support. The dominant form of living arrangements of the elderly was coresidence with a married son. As Mason (1991) observed, there is a distinct and, in some cases, a relatively inflexible preference among the elderly in many East Asian societies to coreside with one or more adult sons. The survey result indicates that, in the study area, the influence of traditional norms was still strong. However, in none of the households did two or more married siblings coreside with their parents under one roof. It seems that the stem-joint household, a form typically observed in wealthy households in traditional China, has almost disappeared in modern times. This reflects the trend for Chinese families to become increasing small and nuclearised¹⁸. Unlike some other East Asian countries like Japan and Korea, it is not a common practice in China for the eldest son to remain at home, inherit family property, and provide for the elderly parents. With whom the parents are to coreside is often influenced by a number of factors. In the study area, parents were more likely to coreside with the youngest son. Of the 129 old persons coresiding with a married son, over half (56.6 per cent) chose to live with the youngest son, twice the proportion living with the eldest (24.8 per cent). Here attention should be paid to the fact that some persons in the eldest son group were single sons in the family. For the parents, to live with them is the only choice, if not living alone or with a daughter. Once families with two or more sons were considered, the proportion of old people coresiding with the youngest sons increased to 61.8 per cent.

As discussed in Chapter 3, land, the major element of production in rural China, is still community owned. Even under the household responsibility system, farmland was only allocated to families on a per capita basis. As I found out from personal interviews, economic factors, such as inheritance of family properties, only played a limited role in parents' decision to coreside. Most commonly, the child who coresides with the parents at the end of their life span has remained in the parental home most of the time since childhood. Thus, although many parents start out their elderly years with several children

¹⁸ The 1992 survey on aged population found that only 1.1 per cent of rural elderly lived with two or more married children in one household (China Research Centre on Ageing, 1994).

coresident, over time children get married and move out one by one until typically the youngest is left. Sometimes, the choice was more likely be influenced by parents' personal affection.

Participant 1: There are no rules with which son parents coreside. Parents usually live with the one they feel most worried about.

Participant 2: Economic conditions never count. The elderly are willing to live on chaff with the family they choose (Focus discussion group, young males).

Traditionally, the youngest child in the family always enjoyed partiality from parents. If the youngest child was a boy, he would continue to live at home after his marriage. There are also some practical reasons for parents staying with the youngest sons. For example, the youngest are more likely to need parental help, because they are not as well established as their elder siblings. Since the youngest sons in the family have received special treatment from their parents, they are expected to bear the major responsibility in caring for them in old age, often with financial assistance from other non-coresident siblings.

Mr. Liu Jianhai, my host in Nanshangzhao, is the youngest one of three brothers in his family. He moved to a new house after marriage, while his parents live with his second elder bother. Mr. Liu's brother is good in farming and manages 24 *Mu* of land, half of which is sub-contracted from fellow villagers. He needs more help at home because he has four children, three daughters and one son. Mr. Liu feels embarrassed for not living with his parents. 'People are gossiping', he said. Mr. Liu's wife, married into the family from a neighbouring village, is under even greater pressure. She has to visit her parents-in-law more frequently to prove that she is not an unfilial daughter-in-law. Traditionally, the relationship between mothers and daughters-in-law in the village is problematic, often resulting in family disputes. It is especially difficult for young women from outside to gather sympathy and understanding from fellow-villagers (Fieldwork notes).

In the study area, as illustrated in Table 5.2, only a small proportion of old people, about 10 per cent, coresided with a married daughter. For the 14 old persons who had no sons, it was naturally the only choice of coresidence. However, there were still eight old persons who chose to live with their daughter's family, although they also had male

offspring. This indicates that the traditional pattern of coresidence has started to change, or at least, become flexible. It is interesting to find that, unlike the dominant role of the youngest sons in parents' choice of coresidence with sons, the eldest daughters were preferred if parents indeed wanted to live with daughters. Of the 22 old persons, 14 were living with the eldest daughter in the family. A plausible explanation is that parents wanted the eldest daughter to marry and remain at home, so that the married-in son-in-law could help as an additional labour hand when other children were still young.

In the study area, there was a variation of the regular coresidence, in which the elderly lived with each of their surviving children in turn. The old persons concerned were mostly widowed, and their children lived close to each other, say, in the same village. Although this kind of living arrangement was not very popular, being practised by only three out of the 284 old persons surveyed, it provided a chance for adult children to share the responsibility fairly evenly. Actually, it was a simple compromise among quarrelling siblings, not necessarily a desired form of support by the elderly. Old people might face unexpected difficulty or inconvenience in readjusting to the new environment while moving from one family to another. The old persons I visited in Nanshangzhao only considered the by-turns arrangement the last option, if they could no longer take care of themselves. 'I don't like to see my daughter-in-law putting on a long face, as if I owe them something', said an old woman.

Table 5.3: Percentage distribution of old persons, by age group and selected form of living arrangements, Pingling, 1996

Living arrangements	Age group				All	
	60-64	65-69	70-74	75+	%	No.
One-generation household	26.6	26.0	14.0	6.5	19.1	41
Coresident household	73.4	74.0	86.0	93.5	80.9	173
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	
No.	64	54	50	46		214

Source: Household survey data

As displayed in Table 5.3, the proportion of old people living in one-generation households decreased with age. While over one-fourth of the elderly in the group 60-64

lived alone (single or with a spouse), in the group 75 and over the proportion dropped to about one in twenty. It is understandable that, even when financial resources are available, it is still difficult for the 'old old' to live independently by themselves. Old people become too frail at advanced ages to perform daily activities. In the meantime, the widowhood rate among the old old also rises sharply. As discussed in Chapter 4, the proportion widowed among the old people surveyed in this study increased from 18.7 per cent to 58.7 per cent (Table 4.1). Even if old couples can look after each other in independent living, it becomes no longer possible for the survivor after the spouse has died. Martin (1990) suggested that family living arrangements are constantly changing as family members experience different events. Coresidence with children may be delayed until the older parents are widowed or sick. In the study area, the proportion of old people living alone was quite small. From personal interviews I got the impression that this form of living arrangement was not necessarily the old people's own free choice, but rather an unwanted reality they had to accept reluctantly. The reasons for the elderly to choose independent living in Western countries, such as privacy and individualism, are not familiar to the present-day elderly in rural China. Elderly parents were left in the old house simply because all children moved out after marriage. This does not mean that the elderly were abandoned, since arrangements were usually agreed upon by children to share financial and physical support. For old people who were still healthy enough to look after themselves, the big loss might be the happiness of living in a 'normal' large family. It is interesting to find a striking contrast from my experience both in the study area and in Australia. While old people in Australia are usually very proud of living independently, the few elderly I visited during my fieldwork were quite upset at having to live by themselves. It seems that living arrangements also have different emotional and psychological meanings to people of different generations and from different cultural backgrounds.

5.3. The availability of family members

Family support of the elderly, in its very sense, is provided by family members. Therefore, the availability of family members, particularly children, is a major factor

influencing the extent to which the support is provided. Understandably, those old people who do not marry, those who divorce or are widowed and those who have no living children are especially vulnerable. In this section, the discussion focuses on the two aspects of the availability of family members: the demographic availability in terms of the widowhood rate and the total number of living children, and the geographic availability in terms of the residence distance and contact frequency between elderly parents and adult children. To a certain extent, the type of living arrangements can also be considered as an indicator of the geographic availability of family members. For example, coresidence means that at least an adult child is always available at home.

5.3.1. The availability of a spouse

It is understandable that, in most studies on family support of the elderly, attention is focused mainly on the support provided by family members of younger generations. However, mutual support and care by elderly spouses also play an essential part in preserving the overall well-being of the elderly, particularly when the couple lives by themselves. Old men, usually in a better financial position, play the role of resource providers, and old women, often a few years younger, the role of caregivers. And not the least, love and companionship between the old couple is not something that can easily be replaced by other family members. For example, when people get old in China, they commonly refer to their spouse affectionately as *laobanr* (my old companion).

Traditionally, the economic security of an old man in rural China might rest on the ownership and control of family property, whereas that of an old woman depended entirely on the provision of her husband or children. Although great efforts have been made by the government over the last few decades to promote gender equality, the status of women, especially old women, is still relatively low at home and in the community. Very few old women in rural areas have control over family resources. As shown from the household survey in the study area, only nine of the 56 elderly household heads were old women (Table 4.3). None of the old women I visited in Nanshangzhao agreed that they

had a final say in family decisions. However, it is relatively easy for them to influence the outcome when their husbands are in control. ‘Sons just listen to their own wives’, complained an old informant. On the other hand, old women provided most of the physical support and care for their elderly husbands, such as cooking, washing and housework. Even in multigeneration households, old women did more in caring for old men than all other family members.

Table 5.4: Percentage distribution of old persons living with their spouse, by age group and sex Pingling, 1996

Sex	Age group				Total	
	60-64	65-69	70-74	75+	%	No.
Males	82.9	66.7	90.0	52.9	74.7	74
Females	79.3	59.3	46.7	24.1	52.2	60
All	81.3	63.0	64.0	34.8	62.6	134

Source: Household survey data

Table 5.4 shows that in the study area more males than females lived with their spouse, and the proportion decreases with age. Females were less likely to reside with their spouse, reflecting a greater incidence of widows, particularly in the oldest group of 75 years and above. The proportion of old women living with their spouse declines more rapidly with age than for old men. For example, 79 per cent of women aged between 60 and 64 lived with their spouse; this figure falls to 24 per cent for those aged over 75. The equivalent decrease for old men is relatively moderate, from 83 to 53 per cent. As in most Third World settings, the high widowhood rate among old women in rural China has three plausible reasons: the higher life expectancy of women, the tendency for men to marry younger women, and the traditional intolerance of the remarriage of old women.

Under the current circumstances in the study area, the level of financial and material support provided by the family is not necessarily related to old people’s marital status. However, the availability of a spouse did have an important effect on the overall well-being of the elderly, particularly in meeting their special needs in physical and emotional support. It seems that old men were more likely to have a spouse providing

such support. In comparison, most old women would depend on other family members, mainly their children, for support in finance, materials, daily activities and companionship. As a by-product of the rising life expectancy, it can be expected that the joint survival of elderly spouses will increase in future. Although the financial implication of such a development is still not clear, the mutual support and care by the elderly themselves will certainly ease their dependence on other family members.

5.3.2. The availability of children

In the discussion of family support for the elderly, the most significant demographic availability of family members is perhaps the availability of children. Old-age security has been widely believed to be one of the important motives for high fertility in developing countries (Nugent, 1985). Many arguments that fertility decline will erode the family's role in providing for the elderly are based on the assumption that the likelihood and extent of family support are associated with the number of living children. As for the present-day elderly in developing countries, being supported by children does not seem to be a problem, since most of them have a large number of children born during a period when fertility was high and deliberate control of family size was rare. For example, Chen and Jones (1989) found in ASEAN countries that only very low proportions of persons aged 60 and over, even those aged 75 and over, had no surviving child. Knodel, Chayovan and Siriboon (1992) found from the 1986 SECAPT survey that the likelihood of receiving support from children, as well as the average number providing support, increased with family size. Nevertheless, the relationship between family size and the extent of support was not obvious. On the bases of their findings in China, Xia and Ma (1994) questioned the validity of the widely accepted view that the function of family support for the elderly would be weakened as the number of children declined. They argued that first, family support was not the same thing as children support, and concern should also be given to the relations between the elderly and their spouses; second, there were many factors affecting the possibility for children to grow up from potential supporters into actual ones; third, family support was a multi-sided concept, including economic support, daily life care

and emotional relief, and the number of children was diversely related to these functions. In this section, however, the discussion is based on the assumption that all living children are ‘potential’ supporters.

Table 5.5: Distribution of old persons and married adult household heads, by age group and number of living children, Pingling, 1996

Age group	No. of persons	No. of children						Mean
		0	1	2	3	4	5+	
60+	214	2	12	19	18	38	125	4.8
40-59	90	0	9	45	27	6	3	2.4
19-39	132	4	52	60	15	1	0	1.7
Total	436	6	73	124	60	45	128	3.0

Source: Household survey data

In Table 5.5 the people covered in the household survey are divided into three age groups: all old persons aged 60 and over, middle-aged household heads aged 40-59, and young household heads aged 19-39. At the time of the survey, over half of the 214 old people had five or more children, and only two remained childless. The highest number of children was eight. On average, old people in the study area had 4.8 children. That the present-day elderly have a large number of children represents a typical pre-fertility decline situation in rural China before the 1970s. In fact, it is likely that they have more living children than did any earlier generations, since mortality dropped sharply while fertility remained high during the period 1950-1970. In old times people might have similarly high fertility, but would end up with fewer living children in old age because of the prevailing high mortality. Thus, the vast majority of the elderly had at least one adult child potentially available for support. Although data from the survey do not allow for detailed analysis on the relationship between the level of support the elderly actually received and the number of children they had, a large number of children would provide the elderly with more potential supporters or more choice for coresidence. If an elderly couple have only one son, they have to live with him, no matter what his personality or family finances are, if they do not opt for living alone.

In comparison, as shown in Table 5.5, people of younger generations in the study area had fewer children. In the middle-aged group of 40-59, for example, the average number of children decreases by half to 2.4. The similar figure drops further to 1.7 in the young group of 19-39. The lower fertility of younger generations is largely attributable to the massive family planning programs introduced since the 1970s. However, the low level observed in the young group is not necessarily reliable, because people in this age group might not have completed their childbearing or achieved their desired family size. The level of the middle-aged group looks quite reasonable, slightly above the replacement level.

Children's role as potential supporters not only depends on their number, but also on their geographical availability, that is, the frequency of contact with elderly parents. As Hugo (1988) argued, with rapid rates of urbanisation and age-selective rural-to-urban migration, there is a strong chance that the elderly will be physically separated from those family members who would provide for their support and care. As discussed above, over 80 per cent of old people surveyed in the study area coresided with their children. Daily contact between family members is obviously not a major issue. Problems might arise for the few elderly who lived by themselves. A further look into the survey data reveals that all the 41 old persons living alone had surviving children, ranging from two to eight. The distance between the residence of old people and that of their children varied: 11 had at least one child living in the same village, 13 had one child in the same township, and two had one child in the same district. The remaining 15 old people had children living in other places. Just because family members do not live together, it should not be assumed that financial, practical and emotional support are no longer exchanged. The typical living arrangement of the elderly in Western countries, separate residences in close proximity to children, may also become a preferred option by some of the rural elderly in China.

In the discussion of kin availability, McDonald (1989) pointed out that there can be a fallacy involved in examining only the elderly. It is important also to take account of the middle-aged persons who have surviving parents. In the household survey of this

study, additional information has been collected to examine young adults' role in supporting non-resident parents. Of the 284 households surveyed, 132 were headed by

Table 5.6. Percentage distribution of non-resident old persons, by sex and selected indicators of geographical availability of children, Pingling, 1996

Item	Males		Females		All	
	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.
A. Residence distance						
Same village	85.3	87	84.3	91	84.8	178
Same township	3.9	4	3.7	4	3.8	8
Same district	5.9	6	8.3	9	7.1	15
Others	4.9	5	3.7	4	4.3	9
B. Contact frequency						
Almost daily	76.5	78	75.9	82	76.2	160
1-3 times per week	8.8	9	9.3	10	9.0	19
1-3 times per month	6.9	7	6.5	7	6.7	14
Others	6.3	8	7.0	9	8.1	17
Total	100.0	102	100.0	108	100.0	210

Source: Household survey data

adults under 60 who had elderly parents living separately, totalling 210. As shown in Panel A of Table 5.6, the majority of old people (84.8 per cent) lived with the respondents in the same village. Very few lived beyond the district boundary. Therefore, the contacts between young adults and their non-resident elderly parents were quite frequent, as illustrated in Panel B. Over three-quarters of the old persons maintained almost daily contact with their non-resident children. Another one-tenth met their children one to three times a week. There was a correlation between the distance and the number of visits. The farther the parents lived from their children, the fewer contacts between them. There is only a slight difference in being visited between old men and old women. However, detailed information shows that young women contacted their non-resident parents more frequently than young men. Among household heads who lived with their parents in the same village, all women reported that they visited the elderly almost daily, whereas only 85.3 per cent of young men did so. Although economic support can be accomplished impersonally, such as through remittances, it is widely believed that physical and emotional support requires direct intergenerational contact. The frequent contact between elderly

parents and their non-resident children suggested that the care needs of old people in the study area were largely being met.

5.4. Economic support received by the elderly

The potential for support discussed in the availability of family members may not translate automatically into real support. Questions were also raised in the household survey about the current economic support received by old people in the study area in terms of the form and the level of support. Economic support in the survey is defined as both monetary and material support received on a regular or an *ad hoc* basis. The former includes cash income from own labour, pension benefits, regular living allowances, remittances, and pocket money. The latter includes food, clothes, medication, and gifts such as tea and cigarettes. Assistance in farming and transport is also considered as part of material support, because it helps bring in material benefits or cut down financial costs.

5.4.1. Forms of economic support

In the household survey, six forms of economic support were identified: (1) Self support: referring to the elderly living on their own resources, such as income from own labour, pension benefits or personal savings. (2) Self and children: referring to the elderly living on the joint resources of themselves and children; (3) Mainly sons: referring to the elderly supported mainly by their sons; (4) Mainly daughters: referring to the elderly supported mainly by their daughters; (5) All children: referring to the elderly supported by their children jointly; and (6) Others: referring to the elderly supported by others, such as relatives, community or friends. In Table 5.7, the elderly are divided into four panels according to selected indicators: age group, sex, living arrangements and working status. It is worth noting that 'still working' in the working status panel is defined as full-time engagement in productive activities. 'Retired' refers to those elderly who have retired from formal sector jobs and receive benefits from various pension programs.

Table 5.7: Percentage distribution of old persons, by form of economic support and selected indicators, Pingling, 1996

Item	Form of economic support ^a						All	No.
	1	2	3	4	5	6		
A. Age group								
60-64	21.9	23.4	43.8	4.7	6.3	0.0	100.0	64
65-69	13.0	3.7	63.0	5.6	13.0	1.9	100.0	54
70-74	6.0	8.0	64.0	10.0	12.0	0.0	100.0	50
75+	0.0	0.0	78.3	10.9	6.5	4.3	100.0	46
B. Sex								
Male	14.1	15.2	51.5	8.1	9.1	2.0	100.0	99
Female	8.7	5.2	68.7	7.0	9.6	0.9	100.0	115
C. Living arrangements								
Alone	20.0	20.0	60.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	100.0	5
With spouse only	33.3	8.3	36.1	0.0	22.2	0.0	100.0	36
With spouse and/or unmarried children	7.1	57.2	35.7	0.0	0.0	0.0	100.0	14
With spouse and/or a married son	4.7	6.2	83.7	0.0	5.4	0.0	100.0	129
With spouse and/or a married daughter	0.0	4.6	0.0	72.7	22.7	0.0	100.0	22
With others	50.0	0.0	12.5	0.0	0.0	37.5	100.0	8
D. Working status								
Still working	57.8	24.4	8.9	0.0	8.9	0.0	100.0	45
Retired	23.1	38.5	23.1	7.7	7.7	0.0	100.0	13
No longer working	2.7	2.0	73.2	10.1	10.1	2.0	100.0	149
Not sure	0.0	28.6	71.4	0.0	0.0	0.0	100.0	7
All	11.2	9.8	60.7	7.5	9.3	1.4	100.0	
No.	24	21	130	16	20	3		214

Source: Household survey data

^aNote: 1=Self support; 2=Self and children; 3=Mainly sons; 4==Mainly daughters; 5=All children; 6=Others.

As shown in Table 5.7, over three quarters (77.5 per cent) of old people surveyed in the study area were supported by adult children in one form or another. Sons were the principal providers, with nearly two thirds of old people (60.7 per cent) receiving economic assistance mainly from their sons. Still, a sizeable proportion of old persons (21.0 per cent) relied on their own resources, or were partially assisted by children, for a living. However, their number decreased with age. In the group aged 75 and above, the

elderly were entirely provided for by children or other relatives. When the elderly's sex is taken into account, women were more likely than men to be supported by sons. In the self support and/or children assistance categories men outnumbered women by half, not surprisingly, because old men tend to keep working on the farm as long as health permits, while old women usually stay at home doing housework. Sons not only played a dominant role in support when coresiding with elderly parents, but also made major contributions to parents living in other arrangements, such as alone, with spouse only, or with unmarried children.

As Andrews and Hennink (1992) pointed out, one aspect of ageing which is often overlooked in many studies is the contribution the elderly make to the household economy, household tasks, care-giving and other daily activities. Among the 214 old people surveyed in the study area, as shown in Table 5.7, 45 were still engaged in full-time productive activities. Consequently, over 80 per cent of the working elderly were able to support themselves economically, assisted occasionally by children. In comparison, over 90 per cent of the elderly no longer working relied primarily on children for support. However, this does not necessarily mean that these old people have stopped working altogether, just eating the bread of idleness at home. On the contrary, most old people I visited still kept themselves busy with various activities on and off the farm. As in most Third World settings, retirement entirely from work at the specific age of 60 is simply inconceivable for most old people in rural China. It is very common for old people to continue working. Productive people in their 60s are not seen as a dependency burden. In advanced ages, old people gradually reduce the time and amount of work according to the limits of their physical capability. Old men in the study area usually gave a helping hand to adult children on the farm, such as in weeding or fertilising. During the fruit-bearing period, some old men even moved temporarily to live in huts built beside family orchards to guard against petty thieves or bird damage. For old women, it is needless to say that their role in cooking, doing laundry, child-minding and other housekeeping tasks is indispensable. This importance of mutual assistance between elderly parents and their adult children in coresidence is also evident from the focus-group discussions.

Participant 1: How can we rural people afford retirement like city-dwellers! One still has to rely on the family. Anyway, the family is yours also.

Participant 2: Old people simply know nothing about staying idle, because we are born to such a hard lot. We are used to it.

Participant 3: As a saying, *liu shui bu fu* (the running water does not go stale), working keeps you always fit (Focus discussion group, elderly males).

Participant 1: It is a habit for old people to keep working, not matter how much they can help. Otherwise, they feel *mei guohuo* (no joys in life).

Participant 2: Parents will lend a hand to any son in difficulty (Focus discussion group, young males).

Participant 1: Whether you have a grandma at home or not really makes a difference. Meals are cooked, and kids are looked after.

Participant 2: Great if the grandma helps. But one can't take it always for granted. What if you are not on good terms with her? (Focus discussion group, young females)

5.4.2. The level of economic support

The well-being of old people is influenced not only by the form of support, but also by the level of the support they receive. Obviously, the level of support is related to the 'adequacy versus equity' issue raised by Rudkin (1993): a concern with adequacy refers to some minimum standards of well-being, whereas a focus on equity emphasises how well one group fares relative to others. In other words, the level of economic support can be discussed from two perspectives: whether the basic needs of the elderly can be adequately met, and whether their living standard is different from that of other generations. In industrialised countries, the amount of individual monetary receipts from various pension programs is often used as an indicator of the economic support the elderly receive. However, such an indicator is not readily available in rural China where the economic

Table 5.8: Percentage distribution of old persons, by monthly living expenditure and selected indicators, Pingling, 1996

Expenditure and selected indicators, Fuzhou, 1990					
Item	Monthly living expenditure (Yuan)			Total	No.
	<50	50-100	>100		
A. Age group					
60-64	76.6	20.3	3.1	100.0	64
65-69	61.1	35.2	3.7	100.0	54
70-74	72.0	28.0	0.0	100.0	50
75+	78.3	19.6	2.2	100.0	46
B. Sex					
Male	69.7	27.3	3.0	100.0	99
Female	73.9	24.3	1.7	100.0	115
C. Living arrangements					
Alone	80.0	0.0	20.0	100.0	5
With spouse only	72.2	27.8	0.0	100.0	36
With spouse and/or unmarried children	57.1	42.9	0.0	100.0	14
With spouse and/or a married son	71.3	27.1	1.6	100.0	129
With spouse and/or a married daughter	86.4	13.6	0.0	100.0	22
With others	62.5	12.5	25.0	100.0	8
D. Working status					
Still working	71.1	26.7	2.2	100.0	45
Retired	61.5	23.1	15.4	100.0	13
No longer working	74.5	24.2	1.3	100.0	149
Not sure	42.9	57.1	0.0	100.0	7
E. No. Of children					
0	100.0	0.0	0.0	100.0	2
1	91.7	8.3	0.0	100.0	12
2	84.2	5.3	10.5	100.0	19
3	50.0	50.0	0.0	100.0	18
4	73.7	26.3	0.0	100.0	38
5+	70.4	27.2	2.4	100.0	125
All	72.0	25.7	2.3	100.0	
No.	154	55	5		214

Source: Household survey data

monetisation is still at a very primitive stage and old-age support is provided primarily by family members through non-monetary means. In the household survey of this study, the level of economic support was defined as the monthly living expenditure of old people in three categories: under 50 *Yuan*, 50-100 *Yuan* and over 100 *Yuan*. The respondents were asked to make a choice that mostly applied to the situation in their family. To address the adequacy issue, the benchmark of 50 *Yuan* in the low expenditure category was based on a rough calculation of the minimum cost of daily necessities old people might need in the study area, according to information collected during focus-group discussions: 25 *Yuan* for staple food like wheat and maize, 10 *Yuan* for non-staple food like vegetables, and 15 *Yuan* for other purposes like clothes and medication. The equity issue can be addressed approximately through a comparison between the expenditure level and the per capita monthly income of 85 *Yuan* made by rural residents in Pingling in 1995.

As displayed in Table 5.8, the majority (72 per cent) of old people spent 50 *Yuan* or less per month, including own labour income and family support. This suggests that the resources at their disposal were barely enough to cover the minimum living cost assumed in this study. About one-quarter of the elderly received 50 to 100 *Yuan* per month, quite abundant compared to the average monthly income of 85 *Yuan* in the region. A very small proportion could afford the high level of expenditure of 100 *Yuan* and over. Older persons and females were more likely to be found in the low expenditure category. The effect of living arrangements and working status, however, cannot be found in a consistent pattern. It seems that old people coresiding with sons were slightly better off than those with daughters, and old people still working were slightly better off than those not working. A further look into the three-generation households reveals that the proportion of old people receiving support below 50 *Yuan* was lower in households headed by elderly parents (48.1 per cent) than that by adult children (65.6 per cent). It indicates that coresidence with adult children in an 'ideal' extended family was not necessarily a sign of special economic well-being or good treatment for the elderly. What is important is whether the elderly were in real control of the family's finances. Similarly, people still working were likely to have better access to family resources.

The number of children is believed to be a key factor in influencing old people's well-being, as in a traditional Chinese saying: the more sons, the more happiness. Rearing many sons was considered an investment for old-age support. The data from the household survey show that the proportion of old people in the low expenditure category decreases gradually from 100 per cent in the childless group to 70.4 per cent in the five and above group, which suggests the possibility of a correlation between the number of children and the level of living expenditure of the elderly in the study area. However, such a relationship is not fully accepted by a chi-square test as statistically significant. Obviously, the level of living expenditure of the elderly was dependent also on other factors. While coresidence undoubtedly involved the most comprehensive type of support, non-resident children also made contributions to ease the burden of their siblings who were coresident. In the household survey, 144 household heads had parents living separately. Over two-thirds of them (67.4 per cent) reported providing regular living allowances for their non-resident parents. Of the 22 female household heads, those who made regular contributions accounted for 68.2 per cent, even slightly higher than that of males at 67.2 per cent. It was still not popular for women in the study area to head a household. Nevertheless, the above proportion indicates that, once they assumed the control of family resources, they also took over responsibility for old-age support.

In the study area, adult children were well aware of their individual obligations. Unlike in Japan where a particular child is clearly designated in advance as the main supporter, in rural China sons share equally in supporting elderly parents. Such obligations were generally agreed upon when adult children, normally sons, moved out of the parental house to form their own family after marriage. If they do not share equally, they usually do not benefit equally in the division of household resources. Before, support agreements were often reached orally under the supervision of village cadres. In recent years, they must be written down on the old-age support contract, including the detailed obligations that each coresiding and non-residing child had to fulfil. From non-residing children, a living allowance was often paid in cash, since old people are largely self-sufficient in staple

food nowadays from the land plots allocated under their own names. Cash was more flexible for purchasing other necessities on the market. It is quite interesting to find that living allowance was commonly paid in accordance with an unofficial local standard, approximately 50 to 60 *Yuan* per old person. This standard was also widely accepted in most old-age support documents as a basis for calculating each adult child's obligation. Therefore, having more children, particularly sons, does not necessarily mean that elderly parents would receive a higher level of economic support, but rather that each son paid a smaller share to meet that standard. Full living allowances were more likely to be paid to the elderly living alone. For example, if an old couple had three non-resident sons, each son would provide about 40 *Yuan* per month. If there were five non-resident sons, however, each one only had to pay about 25 *Yuan* per month. When the elderly parents coresided with one son, other non-resident sons just had to pay a limited amount of pocket money, ranging from five to 20 *Yuan* per month. It is not unusual to hear complaints from old people about the heavy burden of rearing many children, particularly many sons. They provided housing and paid the costs of the wedding when sons married, but when they became old, having more sons did not result in receiving more income or support. Worse still, having more sons might cause more domestic conflicts and arguments. If a non-resident son shirked his commitment to paying the living allowance on time, parents were reluctant to go asking for the payment, for fear of damaging 'face' or family reputation. As an informant pointed out, old parents would rather live in difficulty than make a demand. Sometimes, village cadres were called in to settle the dispute. In the traditional belief of '*jiachou bu ke wai yang*' (domestic foibles should not be exposed), nothing was more embarrassing.

5.5. Old people in different situations: case studies in Nanshangzhao

The above discussions, based mainly on the quantitative data collected from the household survey, are aimed at an overall picture of the economic support received by old people in the study area of Pingling. In reality, needless to say, conditions vary markedly from one family to another. Qualitative information collected from observation and in-

depth interviews in Nanshangzhao Village may give more insights into the way families provided for the elderly and old people coped with or adapted to different situations in their later years.

5.5.1. Childless elderly

In rural China where sons and the family are given top importance in old-age support, the childless elderly are of particular interest. Marriage in Chinese society is almost universal, and the proportion of childless elderly is very low. Traditionally, if a couple had difficulty in giving birth to or bringing up a biological child, adoption was a widely accepted alternative. Children were usually adopted from close relatives, a practical choice for continuing the family line and fostering kin solidarity. This arrangement also ensured that the adopted children suffered no discrimination in the community. According to the 1992 survey on aged population, the proportion never married among the rural elderly was 1.1 per cent, and the proportion childless was 2.4 per cent (China Research Centre on Ageing, 1994). However, for the small number of disadvantaged people who ended up in old age without a child, particularly a son, life was really hard. During the collective period from the mid-1950s to the early 1980s, childless old people were commonly provided for by community welfare funds under the Five Guarantees system to meet their basic needs in food and fuel, clothing, housing, medical treatment, and burial. However, this was provision at a very basic level. Those who received it suffered from low social status and a sense of humiliation. Since the Household Responsibility system was introduced, a lot of community welfare programs have been reduced or even abolished, because of the shrinkage in welfare funds. In the study area of Pingling, childless old people relied largely on their own labour income and *ad hoc* material assistance from relatives. Villagers' committees usually provided some cash during harvest or holiday seasons. In the household survey, only two childless old people were identified. One is an old man of 65 living with his younger wife. The couple depend mainly on self-support. Another is a widowed old woman of 84 living with relatives in a large family of nine. In terms of the level of economic support, both old people fell into the low-

expenditure category. As Davin (1994) suggested, the poverty and low standard of living provided farmers with a constant reminder of the sad fate of those who failed to bring up children.

Uncle A, 62, is the only childless old man in Nanshangzhao, living alone in an old but well-kept house with a big courtyard. He has four brothers, two living in the neighbourhood and two working in other cities. There is only limited contact with his brothers' families, because his nephews are 'unfilial' and always make troubles. Uncle A used to work as a factory worker in Baoji after graduating from a polytechnic school in the 1950s. In the early 1960s, he was forced to quit the job owing to so-called 'political misconduct', and returned to Nanshangzhao with a lump sum pension of 7,000 *Yuan*, quite a fortune during that time. After their parents died, the brothers divided family property, and Uncle A lives since then in the house allocated under his name. He did not marry until in his late 40s, because during the commune period he was discriminated against as a 'political enemy'. In the late 1970s when the situation improved after the reform, he married a divorced woman with a girl of 15. The couple worked hard and saved enough money for the girl's education all the way to college. After the girl was assigned a job by the government in Xianyang, Uncle A's bad luck returned. First his wife moved out to live with her daughter in the city, and two years later filed a divorce from him. Left alone, Uncle A is extremely disappointed. No longer interested in getting married again, he has already started to prepare for his own old-age security. Fortunately, his old skill in the factory helped him find a job two years ago in a private-owned garage in the village after the liberalisation of rural economy. Now he can make 200-300 *Yuan* per month. Normally, Uncle A has little to spend, because, like other villagers, he is basically self-sufficient in food. The money he earned goes largely to savings. He is quite optimistic that he will be able to support himself in old age. 'Nothing to worry about. I shall keep working until I can no longer. See, I've even got my coffin and graveclothes ready at home', he tells me proudly. Asked why he does not join the life and old-age insurance program offered by the township office of the China Insurance Company, Uncle A gives two reasons. First, the manager of the office is not trustable, because he was involved in a financial scandal just a few years ago. Second, it is not time to think about retirement, because he thinks himself still in good health at the moment (Fieldwork note).

Of course, Uncle A's situation is unique in the study area. First, his being childless resulted primarily from political reasons beyond his control. Second, he is able to support himself with his skills that have become highly valued in rural industry. Third, the experience of working in a factory in a big city makes him familiar with modern ideas such as independent living. Economically, Uncle A has basically secured his own old-age

support. Physically, however, he may still need assistance once he is too feeble to look after himself. I heard from village cadres that people have already tried to find him a new partner. To fellow villagers, a person living alone is simply inconceivable. Well established but still not very old, Uncle A should have no problem to get remarried if he likes.

5.5.2. The elderly with no sons

Family support for the elderly is supposed to be provided by all family members, especially adult children. In traditional China, however, sons were required to bear the major responsibility of old-age support. Indeed, sons represented survival, prosperity, security and a future for the family. Because of their potential role as begetters and providers of family income through labour and skills, sons were specially desired by parents, as reflected in an old saying 'the more sons, the more family fortune'. Of course, sons were preferred not only for economic reasons. In the traditional practice of ancestor worship, sons also represented the continuity of the family line, linking ancestors and descendants. In the study area, for example, it is the eldest son's responsibility to organise his parents' funeral ceremonies, even if he was not the prime provider of economic support. In spite of their efforts, it is natural that a small number of people might end up without a son in old age. Among the 214 elderly surveyed, 16 had only daughters, ranging from one to five. All but two of them coresided with a married daughter. These two, an old couple, lived separately from their three married daughters in the same village. Similar patterns have also been found by Goldstein and Ku (1993) in a community study in Zhejiang province. Old people without sons usually adapted in two ways: some kept a daughter at home, bringing her a husband who would live with them in an extended family; others lived in separate residences in close proximity to a married daughter. In the study area, married-in sons-in-law are usually referred to as *bange'er* (half-sons) or *yanglao nuxu* (sons-in-law of old-age support), indicating explicitly their essential roles in providing for the parents-in-law.

Uncle B, 65, and his wife have no sons but four daughters. All daughters are married. Girls commonly marry at younger ages. After the three elder ones married

out one by one (two in neighbouring villages and one in the neighbourhood), Uncle B helped the youngest daughter find a husband through relatives and got her married at home. Now the young couple have two boys of their own. The young man, Mr. Li, is from a poor village about 300 kilometres away in North Shaanxi. He came to the nearby city of Xianyang as a migrant worker a couple of years ago, while his two elder brothers remained at home with his parents. Mr. Li is quite happy to stay, because Nanshangzhao is economically much better off than his home village¹⁹. He gets not only a nice wife, but also a well-established family, without having to start from scratch himself. Uncle B and his wife are also satisfied. The young man has received more schooling than their daughter, and brings regular cash income from his job in Xianyang. More importantly, the young man is sensible, respectful and always well-mannered. Uncle B thinks he is treated much better by his son-in-law than other elderly by their biological sons. 'Sons tend to be careless, and take everything for granted', said Uncle B. It is interesting that, as part of the marriage conditions, Mr. Li accepted not only the responsibility to support his parents-in-law, but also a special arrangement that his eldest son takes Uncle B's surname to sustain the family line. That means, when Uncle B dies one day, his eldest grandson, not his son-in-law, is expected to chair the funeral rituals, even nominally. Mr. Li's younger son, on the other hand, follows his father's surname. The two boys therefore have different surnames, representing two separate family lines (Fieldwork note).

Traditionally, a young man who married into his wife's family usually suffered from low status or discrimination as *waixingren* (persons with exceptional surnames) in the community, particularly in a single-lineage village where all people belonged to the same clan. In Nanshangzhao, however, such discriminative practice is not popular because there is no single dominating clan in the village. In single-lineage villages virilocal marriage was also a routine practice so that girls rarely married young men in the same village. However, it is not uncommon in Nanshangzhao that young women get married locally and live near their parental house after marriage. Regardless of their current living arrangements, old people can still receive frequent visits from married daughters. In the focus-group discussions, Uncle B's situation was repeatedly mentioned by the elderly as an example that a good son-in-law is better than an unfilial biological son. Greenhalgh, Zhu and Li (1994) also found in their study that married-in sons-in-law could provide unexpected benefits for the family involved. They often brought new skills with them, and treated their parents-in-law better than real sons did. This suggests that old people in the

¹⁹ Migrant workers usually have difficulties to get registered as formal residents in cities, even if they have

study area have begun to accept that the number and sex of children are not necessarily the sole determinants of old-age support. Sons-in-law are particularly expected to be, and highly valued as, potential providers of economic support. Nevertheless, they are not considered a proper replacement for sons in social and religious functions.

5.5.3. The elderly living separately from children

Although coresidence was the prevailing form of living arrangements of the elderly in the study area, as discussed in above sections, there was still a small proportion of old people who lived in separate residences from adult children, alone or with spouse. Under the current circumstances of rural China where a public pension program is non-existent, separate living is slightly different from independent living as observed in most industrialised countries. Independent living stresses primarily the financial independence of the elderly, while separate living refers mainly to the geographic separation between parents and children. Financially, some old people in the study area, particularly males and people in their early 60s, relied on their own labour income²⁰, others depended entirely on non-resident children for support. However, for the very frail old persons, the need for physical assistance and care becomes increasingly evident in independent living as well as in separate living.

Uncle C, 65, is partly paralysed from a stroke and bedridden most of the time. He requires constant care from his wife, the only other person in the family. Fortunately, Aunt C, an untiring woman in her late 50s, can still manage to carry out most caring tasks, such as cooking, dressing, doing laundry and housework, and assistance in using the toilet. Uncle C and his wife have five sons and one daughter. The four elder ones moved out to their own houses in the same village after marriage, while the youngest one remained. It has been settled in the family division agreement that the youngest son will take responsibility for supporting the elderly parents, because he is going to inherit the family house. Eight years ago, the young man left home to join the army. Originally, he planned to return home after three years of routine service. However, he was later sent to a military school for advanced training, and promoted to an officer position. Being uncertain about

married locally. However, rural residence is easy to obtain.

²⁰ For the present-day elderly in rural China, as discussed in Chapter 4, private properties or personal savings, if any, are extremely limited.

his returning home, the young man now settles down with his wife in Gansu. His marriage was actually held at home. Before the young couple left, they renovated the family house and prepared two coffins for his parents according to the local custom. To fulfil his obligations of old-age support, the young man regularly sends money back. After he heard of his father's illness, what he can do is just to increase the remittance to 50 *Yuan* per month. Uncle C's elder sons now help look after the farm, and occasionally do shopping in Xianyang. Each of the four sons provided ten *Yuan* per month as pocket money. At this income level, the old couple can afford quite a comfortable life, as observed from their living conditions. Everything in the house is kept clean and tidy. There is a TV set in the bedroom, and a modern stove in the kitchen that uses honeycomb-shaped briquette, commonly found in the cities. By comparison, other families in the village still use the old-fashioned brick stoves built on the kitchen floor. The old woman is much concerned about who is going to care for her husband if she is no longer capable. She does not see an elder son and his family moving in as an option. Rather, she still misses her youngest son and hopes that he will return home soon. 'Look, his bridal chamber is still kept intact', Aunt C said sadly while showing me the room (Fieldwork note).

That Uncle C and his wife now live by themselves is obviously not their free choice. The unexpected disruption of coresidence is caused largely by a mismatch in life-cycle transitions between the two generations. As people age, their needs in assistance increase because of disengagement from economic activities and the onset of chronic health problems. In the meantime, their children also proceed through difference life-cycle stages, such as entering the labour force and forming their own families. The living arrangements in which the elderly end up are not necessarily what they originally desired. At the present stage, Uncle C and his wife were basically free from financial worries thanks to the regular remittances from their non-resident son. However, the necessary physical care for the functionally impaired old man could only be given by his wife. Non-resident children, even living close-by, are not always available for help. For the elderly who have needs in both economic and physical assistance, living alone is extremely difficult. Emotionally, independent living is not considered ideal, either, because Chinese traditionally believed that *er sun rao qi* (with children and grandchildren playing around) is part of people's happy life in old age.

5.5.4. The elderly in coresidence

In rural China, old-age support is provided mainly in the form of shared housing, food and other necessities through coresidence. In the study area, as discussed in Chapter 3, land has been evenly allocated, though nominally, to individual families. Limited community welfare benefits are also available to those in temporary financial crisis. Therefore, what villagers worry about is no longer absolute poverty or survival as observed in other developing countries among landless people (Dharmalingam, 1994). Although living standards may vary from one family to another, the treatment received by old people in coresidence was not markedly different from that of other family members under one roof. For most elderly, their life in later years is secure in coresidence. Under current circumstances, family members choosing coresidence are determined largely by cultural norms that require adult children, sons in particular, to provide for their parents in old age. Moreover, coresidence is an effective strategy of the family to meet practical needs for mutual assistance and support between the old and young generations. As discussed in Chapter 6 from the survey data, coresidence in three-generation households is still the most preferred option of living arrangements in old ages. Mutual assistance and care between the old and young generations rank high in people's consideration.

Grandpa D is a widower aged 79, and lives with his only-son's family in a four-generation household. For Grandpa D, such an arrangement has not been interrupted by changing family events over the last few decades, neither his son's marriage nor his wife's death. For his son, Uncle D, supporting the old man through coresidence is his utmost responsibility as a *danchuan* (single successor of the family line). Both Uncle D and his wife, Aunt D, have received high school education, quite uncommon in their generation, and are experienced in managing the household economy. Apart from growing grain and vegetables on their family plot, Uncle D runs a small chicken farm of about 200 birds, and Aunt D makes dresses for external contract at home. On average they can make about 300 *Yuan* per month. Uncle D has two sons and one daughter. The daughter now lives with her husband's family in a neighbouring village. The elder son, a skilled factory worker, stays at home after marriage. His wife also works in a factory. The young couple can bring home regular cash income. They have a little boy of two looked

after by Aunt D. Uncle D's young son is still in high school. Of the seven family members, four are making sizeable cash income. With a total income of over 800 Yuan per month, the family's living standard ranks as one of the highest in Nanshangzhao. Uncle D says that the old man and the toddler boy are the two persons who receive the most preferential treatment in the family. Nevertheless, Grandpa D is in fact not 100 per cent dependent, because he still keeps himself busy with some light housework. According to Aunt D, the old man does not want to stay idle from morning till night. 'Movement is good for health', he likes to say (fieldwork note).

In the study area, as in the case of Grandpa D, the decision of coresidence is usually made commonly before children all get married and move out. The son the parents chose to live with them will stay all the time, and provide for them later in old age. It is not popular for elderly couples to live independently in an 'empty nest' for a certain period after all the children have left home, and one or more children to move in with parents only when they are too old to look after themselves, as observed in some other countries (Martin, 1990). Although Grandpa D has only one son, a situation where the family line is danger of breaking up, he is still able to enjoy a happy life in his later years. An important factor is that the old man's investment in his only son's education finally paid off. Elderly participants in focus-group discussions agreed from Grandpa D's example that the fortune of old people lies not necessarily in how many children they have, but in whether their children are filial and able to make money.

5.5.5. The elderly in destitute conditions

In the study area, the level of support the elderly received is not closely related to their living arrangements, although coresidence seems to be the best form to meet their basic needs. As shown in Table 5.8, the majority of old people covered by the household survey fell into the low living expenditure category, regardless of whom they lived with. It is not unreasonable to assume that a small number of old people still lived in relatively destitute conditions. According to a survey conducted by the District Committee on Ageing in 1995 in Qindu, including the study area of Pingling, 12.5 per cent of the total of 4,940 aged persons had reported constant economic difficulties (Guo, 1995). It is found

that most elderly in this group lived separately from their children, and were unable to work because of advanced age or poor health. That they received inadequate support from children was caused mainly by two factors. Some adult children were constrained in their capacity because they had problems in supporting their own families. Others simply lack willingness to provide for their elderly parents. The latter case was frequently observed in families with many sons.

Grandpa E has been dead for three years. Although he had eight sons, six living in Nanshangzhao and two in other places, he led a miserable life in his later years. Grandpa E and his wife used to live alone on living allowances jointly paid by their non-resident sons. However, not all sons paid their contributions on time. After his wife died, no one was left at home even to prepare food for him. Since the brothers could not reach an agreement on the responsibility to care for the old man at home, Grandpa E had to eat in his sons' families by turns. Other daily activities he still had to perform himself with great difficulty. Extremely upset, Grandpa E fell ill soon. At his deathbed, it is told, the brothers were still quarrelling over medical expenses. I was told by the village old people that the dispute in Grandpa E's family was caused mainly by the discord among his daughters-in-law. Gradually, the solidarity between the brothers was ruined. The old man became an undeserved target of their furies. During my fieldwork, surprisingly, the brothers found renewed unity at the third anniversary of their father's death, the date symbolising the end of the traditional three-year mourning period. They organised a lavish commemoration ceremony, inviting all fellow villagers to a *Qinqiang* (Shaanxi Opera) performance in the daytime and a video show in the evening. However, most old people I talked to disliked such meaningless flaunting of money. 'They do it just to save their own face, because one of the brothers has been nominated as the village treasurer lately,' one old man criticised, 'just like the saying: *huo zhe bu gei yi wan fan, si le yanxi bai man yuan* (when the old man was alive there wasn't a full meal, when he is dead there is a full banquet in the courtyard)! The money could have been better spent on the old man while he was alive' (Fieldwork note).

Although the number of old people in extreme economic difficulties is small, their well-being deserves special concern in studies on old-age support in rural China. As discussed in Chapter 4, the present-day elderly belong to a unique generation in the population. They are more likely to depend on family support because few of them could secure their own old-age support during the commune period. Special efforts are needed to examine why and how some old people fell out of the current family support system,

even they have their own children. As shown in the above case, domestic disputes and lack of willingness to provide support were the major factors leading to Grandpa E's suffering.

There have been frequent reports about a resurgence of traditional family rituals and other associated practices in rural China in recent years (Davin, 1994). Usually family ceremonies serve as an opportunity to strengthen family solidarity and display family influence in the community. So far, the government has shown no real attempts to suppress such activities. However, officials of the District Committee on Ageing were deeply concerned about the spreading of the phenomenon '*boyang houzang*' (insufficient support but extravagant funeral) in the region. It is considered outdated and irrational, not only contrary to the wishes of old people, but also harmful to social conventions in the community.

5.6. The willingness of support

For most families in the study area, to provide for the elderly is not entirely beyond their financial capability, particularly when the elderly have land, the key resource in rural China, registered under their names. The present-day elderly have a large number of children, 4.8 on average, as presented in Table 5.5. In theory at least, if all children contribute to their parents' upkeep, having many children results in a large pool of resources, even if the individual contribution is small. Therefore, the major factor that influences the adequacy of support is the willingness of family members, sons in particular, to fulfil their obligations. Also in theory, having many sons might increase the probability that one will remain filial and meet his commitment eventually. However, the opposite assumption is that everybody's business is nobody's business. The elderly might be neglected in the endless rivalry and dispute among siblings, as seen in Grandpa E's case.

In the study area, the influence of traditional values, such as that sons provide for elderly parents, is still strong, particularly among the elderly. However, the social pressure on younger generations to behave exactly in accordance to old norms is diminishing as the

status of the elderly declines. According to Whyte (1997), there are a number of reasons to suspect that family obligations may have faded in China. For example, the official propaganda promotes loyalties among youth to the Party and the state, rather than to the family. Modernisation threatens filial sentiments by fostering a 'conjugal' pattern of family life that stresses the husband-wife bond, rather than father-son commitment. Under the influence of Westernisation and conspicuous consumption, generation gaps emerge in personal orientations and values. To a certain extent, these factors also work in the study area against traditional norms, leading to a weakened willingness of children to provide support. Nevertheless, as McDonald (1989) pointed out, the measurement of the willingness is difficult because answers will always be given in a context of the need for support and the capability to offer. How to frame appropriate questions is another trouble. Obviously, under the current circumstances in rural China, not being willing to support parents is an attitude that a person is too embarrassed to admit, even if he does have it privately. Therefore, McDonald suggested that recorded behaviour is more useful than questions about attitudes.

In focus-group discussions, both elderly and young participants acknowledged that young people nowadays tended to attach more importance to their own family life. More attention was given to their own children than to elderly parents. The typical answer is that the children nowadays are *jingui* (as precious and dear as gold) because of their small number due to the government's birth control policy. This is in accordance with the 'conjugal' theory proposed first by Goode (1963) that, in the course of modernisation, the focus of family life will gradually shift from the vertical relationship between parents and children to the horizontal relationship between husband and wife. The spirit of independence will be more valued than the traditional norms of obedience and filial obligation. Nevertheless, the theory does not by any means suggest that the elderly will be abandoned. Rather, the responsibility of support should be taken over primarily by public institutions. In the study area, as discussed above, most old people still depended on the family for support. The proportion of those living in economic difficulties were relatively small. From their investigation into the cases of inadequate support, officials of the District

Committee of Ageing found two decisive elements: adult sons' loyalty and their wives' influence. In my own interviews with old persons in Nanshangzhao, ill-mannered daughters-in-law were also blamed for poisoning the parent-son relations, vividly reflected in a popular ballad:

Die ba jingu zheng duan le (to raise children, Dad has exhausted his energy),
Niang ba xin cao lan le (and Mum has gone through all sorts of worries),
Wa xu ge xifu xin bian le (the boy ceases to be loyal after marrying a girl),
Yong shang erzi bu jian le (when parents are in need, the young ones can nowhere be found). (Fieldwork note)

If external conditions, such as peer pressure or financial capability, remain the same, a young man's attitude toward old-age support is usually determined by his moral conscience and the quality of his relations with parents. Officials of the District Committee on Ageing believed that education and self-cultivation play a major role in the former case. Educated sons are more likely than the uneducated to remain filial and committed (Guo, 1995). In the latter case, as Goldstein and Ku (1993) found in their Zhejiang study, support from children was in many cases a function of how the elderly had treated their children in the past. This finding is of special significance when the sex of the old person and the number of children are taken into consideration.

Nugent (1985) argued that children's loyalty is shaped not only by existing social norms, but also through a 'loyalty training process' in the family. Since dispensers of such training are usually women, they are more likely to gain from such loyalty training. The household survey results reveal that widowed old women in the study area were more likely to coreside with their adult children, as reflected in a local saying: an old mother at home is a blessing for the family. Widowed old men were not always as lucky. In China, the difference stems largely from the varied responsibilities the father and the mother used to bear according to traditional values: *yanfu* (a strict father) who teaches rules and exercises discipline, and *cimu* (a merciful mother) who provide loving care and fostering. Strains in the father-son relationship are not uncommon, only to be concealed under the established custom of filial piety. By contrast, the mother-son relationship is based more on affection than on authority. Therefore, adult sons are more willing to coreside with and

support for widowed mothers than with fathers. Certainly, there are also practical reasons for living with an old woman. For example, old women are able to provide more help in housework and child minding, and for a longer time, because they tend to lose their spouse at an earlier age while still in good health. In comparison, widowed old men are more likely to be in advanced ages or in poor health. Most of them have difficulties in looking after themselves, let alone helping others do housework.

As shown in the case studies in Nanshangzhao, old persons with a few children were not necessarily worse off economically in old age. In comparison, domestic disputes over old-age support are more likely to occur in families with many sons. The present-day adults all experienced hardship during the commune period when they were young. Those from larger families had to face fiercer competition at home for limited family resources and stretched parental attention. Consequently, few of them feel that they owe their parents special treatment. Like the financial obligation, the moral obligation of old-age support is also shared by siblings. The larger the number of siblings, the lighter the burden. As far as willingness for support is concerned, it is possible that a young man from a large family does not feel particularly guilty for breaking his commitment.

In both focus-group discussions and personal interviews, almost all people agreed that daughters-in-law played an essential role in backing up married sons' commitment to old-age support, particularly when young couples lived in separate residence from elderly parents. This reflects not only the increasing popularity of the 'conjugal' pattern of family life, but also a fundamental change in the status of daughters-in-law in rural China. Daughters-in-law traditionally suffered from low status in an extended, patriarchal family. The mother-in-law-daughter-in-law relationship was considered especially difficult, often being a tyranny of the older woman over the younger. However, the status of married young women has improved tremendously over the last few decades, thanks to a number of factors, such as the state propaganda on gender equality and women's empowerment, laws that protect women's rights and interests, the increased level of educational attainment among girls, the abolition of arranged marriage, and the participation of women

in productive activities outside the home²¹. In the study area, for example, the illiteracy rate among old women aged 60 and over was 76 per cent. It dropped to 17 per cent among women aged 40-59, and further to 5 per cent among those aged 18-39. Few young women now stay at home as dependent housewives after marriage. Economic independence enables them to have more freedom and power at home.

Information from qualitative sources suggests that many families in the study area managed the household economy in such a way that the husband makes money, while the wife controls spending. The husband is frequently called *waizhanggui*, literally the manager who supervises external business, and the wife *neizhanggui*, the manager who looks after internal matters, a far cry from the traditional housewives. There were jokes that husbands have to beg for pocket money from their wives, described as persons suffering from *qiguanyan* (tracheitis, a homonym in Chinese for wife-in-tight-control). Even if a non-resident son himself remains loyal, he has to ask his wife's consent, before putting aside a certain amount of family income for his parents. At this stage, how his wife reacts often affects the outcome²². If the wife is supportive, everything will be all right. If not, there will be only two options left for the young man: either to insist on his obligations and annoy his wife, or to disappoint his parents by not paying, or not paying fully, his due share. Unfortunately, a lot of domestic disputes are triggered by such disagreements in providing old-age support. It is interesting to notice that, while complaining of inadequate support, old persons usually looked for various excuses for their sons and blamed daughters-in-law as prime troublemakers.

²¹ According to an old informant, the prohibitive costs of marriage, ranging from 10,000 to 20,000 *Yuan*, might be another reason why the daughter-in-law enjoys special privilege in her husband's family. The family simply cannot afford to lose her in a divorce case.

²² Obviously, it is unrealistic to expect a young woman to be as compassionate to her parents-in-law as to her own parents. Their reaction also depends on how other brothers-in-law contribute.

5.7. Promoting family support at both the national and local levels

In traditional China, support of the dependent elderly by children is determined by strong cultural prescriptions. Although filial impiety was categorised as one of the ten unpardonable offences, family members, and children in particular, provided support to the dependent elderly through a sense of moral rather than legal obligation. No criminal code was introduced to punish persons who failed to fulfil their duties. Since the founding of the People's Republic in 1949, the government has worked out a series of laws and policies that require the financial support of parents by their adult children. It is worth noting that, unlike in other campaigns of social engineering, the Party propaganda never promoted the idea that the state should take over the responsibility of old-age support from families, particularly in rural areas. Phillips (1992) has identified it as one of the communist ideals that have been considerably modified in China. Young people have been encouraged to rebel against feudal or superstitious activities that old people used to practise, such as ancestor worship or arranged marriage. However, this does not necessarily mean that they should also relinquish their responsibility to provide for their parents in old age. On the contrary, respect and support for the elderly are praised among the Chinese nation's principal virtues that should be continually advanced and enriched. However, in recent years, the government has increasingly to resort to administrative and legal measures to enhance family's role in providing old-age support, in order to offset the fading influence of traditional values such as of filial piety in a modernising society.

The responsibility for supporting elderly parents by sons and daughters was first reaffirmed in the 1954 Constitution. Both the 1980 Marriage Law and the 1985 Inheritance Law also include detailed clauses to give legal backing to the obligation of the family to support and care for its elderly members. These obligations fall equally on both men and women. Step, foster and adoptive relationships carry the same privileges and obligations as any other parent-child relationship. In 1996, the People's Congress approved the first special law in this area: the Law on Protection of the Rights and Interests of the Elderly. It sets clear stipulations for family support and social security for

the elderly, their participation in social development, and the legal liabilities of activities that infringe upon their legal rights and interests. In rural areas, family members bear the major responsibility for old-age support. The community should continue to provide for the destitute elderly through the Five-Guarantee (*wubao*) system. Such explicit government requirements for and backing to the obligation of family members become increasingly important at a time when the likelihood and extent of family support is diminishing under the influence of modernisation.

In line with the state policy, local government in the study area has also worked out a series of strategies to promote family support for the elderly, including propaganda and education programs, special organisations like village associations of the elderly, the introduction of the old-age support contract, and a number of back-up old-age insurance programs. With these programs, officials of the District Committee on Ageing hope family support will be increasingly strengthened through institutionalisation, standardisation, and adherence to the principles of policy transparency and the rule of law. As experience over the last few years shows, such strategies and programs have produced quite satisfying results.

Propaganda and mass education programs are considered a part of the regular methods of the Chinese government in policy enforcement. It is no wonder that programs have also been designed to popularise government policies, legal knowledge and moral standards relevant to family support among people of both old and young generations. Usually, government documents and education materials are distributed first to village cadres, and then announced to villagers at regular village meetings or through the village wire-broadcasting system. The top priority is given to the rights and interests of the elderly and the obligations of other family members as set in law, since villagers' knowledge in legal issues is generally inadequate. Each year, the township government will nominate and award on the annual market day (the first of April in the traditional calendar) model villages, model families, model parents-in-law and model daughters-in-law in old-age support and care. That categories are created specifically for parents-in-law and

daughters-in-law confirms once more the importance of the relationship between them in securing family support in the study area. In the meantime, verdicts of the district court will also be publicly announced on persons who have failed repeatedly to fulfil their old-age support obligations. With achievers awarded and violators penalised, the local government sends villagers a clear message about what examples to follow.

Under the guidance of the township government, the Township Committee on Ageing started in 1989 to help organise *laonian xiehui* (the old people's association) at village level, which enjoys the same status of mass organisation as the women's federation and the youth league. At the time of my fieldwork, all villages have set up such an organisation to look after the rights and well-being of the rural elderly. All persons aged 60 and over are entitled to membership, and a small group of three to five people is elected as standing representatives²³. The association has three major tasks: working out village regulations on protection of the rights and interests of the elderly and, in association with the Party branch and the villagers' committee, supervising their implementation; organising study and recreational activities for the elderly, particularly on the National Old People's Day, the ninth of September; and providing the elderly with practical assistance in every-day life, such as mediation of domestic disputes. For example, an old couple in Nanshangzhao was on bad terms with their three daughters-in-law. They hardly talked to each other. Since the finances of their sons' families were controlled by the young women, the elderly had not received their pocket money for a long time. Having heard of their complaint, the chairman of the old people's association went to visit the young women one by one, and persuaded them to accept an agreement that the association people would come to collect the money every month on behalf of the old couple. Although the chairman was unable to rebuild the family harmony, he at least ensured that the old couple could get their pocket money on time. However, the village association of the elderly as a mass organisation in the community is largely created or imposed by the government from above. To bring into full play its proposed roles depends

²³ They are normally paid some income compensation by the villagers' committee for working for the community.

on at least three factors: whether village cadres are supportive, whether the representatives elected are respected and influential, and whether the community is wealthy enough to provide enough fund. In places where even the Party branch ceases to function, the old people's association only exists in name.

Since the early 1990s, a new program has been introduced in the study area under the name of *shangyang laoren yiwushu* (old-age support contract, Appendix 3), in order to provide solid legal backing to family support. According to the officials of the committee, the program is designed not only to put into effect the national policies such as family support and family planning²⁴, but also to meet the practical demands of the local elderly. Traditionally, old-age support responsibilities of children were agreed upon orally at the time of family division, usually under the supervision of a clan elder or a village cadre. Disputes often occur because of the lack of a written document. Government officials also feel it is difficult to intervene. Enlightened by the recent education programs, old people have become increasingly conscious that their rights and interests need more legal protection. The old-age support contract serves exactly such a purpose.

The old-age support contract is defined as a permanent document with legal effect that only terminates once the dependent elderly die. The standard contract form is printed and distributed by the District Committee on Ageing. It is to be signed by both the providers and the dependants, and approved by the villagers' committee and the old people's association. For legal considerations, the contract also has to be notarised by the district office of the public notary. If a dispute arises, the dependent elderly have the right to ask village cadres to mediate or the district court to intervene. In the study area, all young couples with parents aged 60 and above are required to sign the contract. For those who apply for marriage registration, no certificate will be granted until they can present a completed copy. In Nanshangzhao, village cadres even insisted that they would only accept invitations to a marriage ceremony if the young couple agreed to announce their old-age support contract in front of the guests. In some other villages, the completion of

²⁴ The old-age security motive of high fertility is discussed in Chapter 6.

the old-age support contract has been further linked to the allocation of house sites or birth plan quotas. At the time of my fieldwork, a total of 56 copies of old-age support contracts have been finalised.

The old-age support contract consists of two categories: material support and emotional support. The terms of support are usually proposed by children, and agreed to by elderly parents. In a copy I acquired from a coresident young couple in Nanshangzhao, the former category includes items like providing appetising meals, seasonal clothes, pocket money, birthday presents, and health care, while the latter category includes items like frequent inquiry about parents' opinions and needs, maintaining family harmony, and no quarrel and arguments. In the case of non-resident children, the amount of living allowance payment is usually fixed in detail. As stated in the contract, the agreed terms can be readjusted if conditions alter. As acknowledged by officials of the District Committee on Ageing, the introduction of the old-age support contract is only part of the government efforts to promote family support for the elderly in rural areas. There is still room for further improvement after this formal job is done. Nevertheless, the presence of a written contract did help reduce the incidence of domestic disputes in the study area. In 1994, for example, 5 per cent of all cases heard by the district court involved support disputes. In 1995, this proportion dropped to only 0.3 per cent. Many disputes were settled in the community without appealing to the court.

Although family support is the major form promoted by the government, there is still a small number of old people that end up with no children and resources to depend on. Therefore, the government also encourages a number of back-up measures to prevent those childless elderly from falling into poverty, mainly the Five-Guarantee system and old people's homes. At the present stage, however, the service and assistance provided under such programs are extremely limited, because of difficulties in raising community welfare fund. In the study area, the childless elderly who are unable to work could receive on average 30 *Yuan* of assistance per month. The township government also runs a small home with only four residents and a middle-aged woman as carer.

5.8. Summary remarks

As people become frail with age and retreat from economic activities, there is a gradual increase in their needs for assistance and support, which can be divided roughly into three areas: economic, physical and emotional. In the study area, as in other places in rural China, old-age support is provided primarily by the family. Old persons were more likely to live with and be supported by married sons, particularly the youngest one. This quite agrees the 'role reversal' model frequently mentioned in the intergenerational transfer theories, where adults at working ages provide support to both old and young dependants in the household. Under current circumstances, coresidence is the most popular form of old-age support for a number of reasons, such as the influence of cultural norms, cost-effectiveness thanks to the economy of scale in shared food, housing and other facilities, and benefits from mutual support and care between members of different generations. Still, a small number of old persons lived separately from their children and relied mainly on self-support. The present-day elderly have on average a large number of children as potential providers, because they are the generation who experienced the high fertility period from the 1950s to the 1960s. Most of them, including those living alone, have non-resident children living in the vicinity. Over two-thirds of non-resident children reported regular economic transfers to their parents. Generally, the level of economic support the elderly received was not high, with the majority falling in the low-expenditure category of 50 *Yuan* or less per month. However, absolute poverty is not a major issue because old persons have land plots allocated under their names. The community can also provide limited relief fund in case of crisis.

The level of economic support the elderly received was not necessarily closely related to the number and sex of children they have or children's financial capacity. Rather, it was influenced primarily by the willingness of children to provide support. In the study area, daughters-in-law were more likely to take the lead in making family decisions, because they usually control the household finance, especially in non-resident, nuclear

families. This diverged markedly from the old Chinese traditions of patriarchy and masculine authority in family life. Inadequate support was often caused by domestic disputes between parents and children or among siblings.

As Chan (1991) suggested, the Chinese government has adopted a 'reluctant collectivist' policy rather than a classical socialist one in developing the country's welfare programs. It has basically decided that support and care for the elderly will continue as a family responsibility, particularly in rural areas. Nowadays, modernisation is gradually eroding the influence of traditional values such as filial piety as shown in the study area, resulting in weakened willingness of children to provide for elderly parents. As a counterbalance, the government has introduced a series of political, economic and legal measures to back up the familial system of old-age support. Some of these measures are quite unique, such as the village association of the elderly and the old-age support contract. Obviously, these measures are hardly ill intended. However, the way they are enforced reminds people of the government's regular practice: resorting to mass campaign and political pressure to push forward the state will. In China's current transition from state economy to a more market-oriented economy, the exceptional intervention of the government in people's everyday life can still be felt.

CHAPTER 6

OLD-AGE SECURITY AND FAMILY PLANNING:

ATTITUDE AND STRATEGY

6.1. The old-age security-fertility hypothesis

In China as in most developing countries, old people receive much economic, physical and emotional support from their children. However, it does not logically follow that they have children only for this reason. In previous literature, there are at least three major theories trying to explain people's fertility motives, based on different assumptions and in different analytical frameworks. First, the 'benefit maximisation' approach, or the micro-economic neoclassical theory, assumes that couples as 'economic persons' tend to maximise household benefits directly or indirectly through rational allocation of limited household resources. In this context, children are viewed as a particular type of good. As the society undergoes gradual transformation from a lower level of development to a higher level, the role of, and expectations from, children also changes from investment goods to consumer durables. The concept of children as an investment good and an assurance of old-age security is considered to be one of several props sustaining high fertility in developing countries. Second, the 'social-cultural' approach believes that social and cultural factors also play a role in situations where economic factors fall short of providing evidence. In China, for example, peasants believe that giving birth to a son is their filial obligation to continue the family line, 'to continue the incense smoke at the ancestral shrine'. Third, the 'risk minimisation' approach holds that high in priority among people's basic concerns for the future are those of risk and uncertainty, particularly in rural areas of developing countries where the market is usually incomplete and imperfect and pension programs are unavailable. For parents there may be no alternative but to rely on children to reduce and cope with these risks. They will not make use of family planning services because they must have many children deliberately as 'insurance'. In China, the policy implication is obvious: before the government can find proper answers to all the

risk factors, it seems difficult for rural people to accept the targets set in official birth control plans.

Leibenstein (1957) was the first to introduce the old-age security motive in the analysis of fertility determinants. The hypothesis states that the expectation of relying on children in one's old age promotes the desire for large families. The motive tends to be stronger when the level of development is low and there are no alternative old age and insurance programs. Over the last few decades, there have been an enormous number of studies on the value of children in influencing fertility in developing countries. The findings and arguments available support as well as negate the hypothesis that consideration of children, sons in particular, as old-age economic security strongly influences the fertility level upward. The conflicting evidence, therefore, suggests that the old-age security-fertility relationship must be analysed within the given social and economic structures so as properly to understand the working mechanism.

Early evidence of the importance of children as sources of old-age security came mainly from micro-level studies in developing countries. For example, Cain (1981) observed from a comparative study in South Asia that under conditions of old-age risks (such as disability) and generalised risks (such as natural disasters), and in the absence of efficient risk-coping institutions, the insurance value of children may be an overriding incentive to have a large family. It may be necessary to have an average of five children to ensure that a son will be available to care for his parents when they are old. A more systematic and comprehensive investigation of the importance of the old-age security motive for children in various countries is found in the Value of Children Project. Kagitcibasi (1982) concluded in the project report that the old-age security value of children is more likely to be found in developing countries than in developed countries, women are more likely than men to give old-age security as a very important reason for having a child, and sons are more likely than daughters to be important sources of old-age support.

Nugent (1985, 1990) is one of the main proponents of the 'risk-minimisation' theory, arguing that people in developing countries face much more substantial risks than those in industrialised countries because of greater fluctuations and uncertainties. Having reviewed a substantial number of studies from different parts of the world, he identified a number of institutional conditions that make children sources of old-age security: (1) underdeveloped capital markets; (2) uncertainty about the accumulation of assets necessary for old age and disability; (3) the absence or inefficiency of private or public old-age and disability insurance programs; (4) confidence in the loyalty of children to their parents; (5) the absence of well-developed labour markets for women and children; (6) underdeveloped markets for the goods and services that elderly people consume; (7) the absence of a spouse who is considerably younger; and (8) the perception of old age as an appreciable portion of the life cycle. These conditions are created and maintained by the macro-economic structure, social institutions and specific cultural norms. He concluded that

old-age security is likely to be an important motive for fertility when the relevant parent is both uncertain about his/her ability to be self-supporting in old age and dubious that there are other more reliable or more effective means of such support than his/her own children (Nugent, 1985: 76).

It is plausible to assume that old-age security still remains a major fertility motive in the study area, because most of the conditions identified by Nugent also exist there. In the context of rural China, the micro-economic neoclassical theory is useful in explaining couples' fertility decisions. Children may be viewed as an investment good and an assurance of old-age security when savings institutions and pensions do not exist, assuming that the cost of rearing many children is either negligible or made worthwhile by the expected benefits. As a popular saying has it, *yang er fang lao, ji gu fang ji* (rearing children for old age and laying up grain against famine), children are considered as important as grain reserves in crisis management. However, to what extent have the villagers made the investment, that is, how many children are sufficient for future support needs? A conventional assumption of the fertility-security hypothesis is that the expectation of relying on children for old-age support promotes high fertility. Couples will

try to minimise the chance of inadequate support and care by having as many children as possible (Polgar, 1971; Jones, 1977). Bulatao (1981) found, in his study on the value of children at different stages in the family formation process, nevertheless, that economic considerations appear to be important only after the third child. The old-age security factor probably does not explain variation among desires for small families. Most people want at least one or two children, regardless of their economic value. De Vos (1985) concluded from a comparative study between Taiwan and the Philippines that expecting old-age economic support from children was an incentive to have large families. However, the effect was not apparent between the replacement threshold of two or more children, but between wanting three or more children. An empirical relationship between the old-age security motive and a desire for large families could be attributable to the fear of child mortality, or the need for sons but no daughters. In China, the level of infant mortality is low at the present stage, 34.4 per thousand according to the 1990 statistics. Child survival is no longer a major consideration in people's fertility decisions. In contrast, son preference still plays an important role (Whyte and Gu, 1987; Wen, 1993). The question is, if sons are still considered investment goods, do people still believe in having as many sons as possible?

Apart from economic considerations such as labour force and old-age support, Chen and Mu (1996) argued, in discussions on people's fertility desires in rural China, that more emphasis should be given to the influence of social norms such as filial piety and son preference that support parental claims for support and care in old age, particularly from sons. According to the Confucian belief of ancestor worship, the way for a person to achieve the ultimate meaning of life is not through his own atonement or reincarnation but the life of his descendants. To practise filial piety and produce a son is the most important responsibility for a person as a link in the live world to continue the family line, and, thus, his own life. Since the interest of the entire family is at stake, fertility decision-making involves not only the young couple in question, but also other family members. In this context, the couple's own interest in old-age security, that is, whether they themselves will be sufficiently supported by children, is reduced to a secondary position. Producing a son,

rearing him to adulthood, and getting him married can be seen as a person fulfilling his family responsibility, not necessarily making an investment for his own future interest. Having met his obligations, the person is entitled to ask his sons to take their responsibility of old-age support, a practice strongly endorsed by the prevailing social norms. The other question is, if one surviving son is sufficient to continue the family line, do people still want additional sons under the current low-mortality regime?

In the reality of the contemporary China, all the economic and social-cultural effects on people's fertility desires fade before a central birth control program. It seems that the old-age security-fertility discussion becomes irrelevant if the government is successful in imposing the standard birth control targets under the One-Child policy that encourages young couple to pledge to have only one child, regardless of sex. As discussed in Chapter 3, this policy is largely based on calculations about the relation between macro-demographic and macro-economic growth. Like most ambitious social engineering programs launched by the government over the last few decades, this policy takes little consideration, at least at the initial stage, of the possible micro-social effects on families and individuals. As Greenhalgh (1993) pointed out, it is appallingly out of touch with reality in rural areas. Since people's fertility desire is motivated by a various factors, it is unrealistic to influence their fertility attitudes and behaviour just by imposing unpopular policies.

Obviously, family planning is of great significance in such a large developing country as China, and family planning programs have achieved remarkable progress by cutting down China's TFR from 5.8 in the early 1970s to 2.2 in the early 1990s. However, fertility did not go down far enough to the level that the government originally expected, even after a wide range of coercive measures were employed. The strategy of using government sponsored massive birth control programs to reduce fertility appears to have reached its limit. For example, Whyte and Gu (1987) have made three major findings from their review of over 20 family-size preference surveys in several locations in China. First, the majority of the respondents did not prefer a large family of three or more children.

Second, few respondents replied that having one child was best. Third, two children were the most commonly stated preference, though desired size was higher in rural than in urban areas. In terms of the sex of children, the overwhelming preference was for one boy and one girl. This indicates that considerable success has been achieved in promoting the small-family norm. But success was less obvious in gaining acceptance of the idea that having only one child is desirable. If underlying family-size preferences were the only influence on fertility behaviour, it is plausible to assume that more women than are currently doing so would have two or more children.

So far, few studies conducted in China have made special attempts to test the old-age security-fertility hypothesis in the presence of a strong government birth control program. This topic was only briefly touched on by Greenhalgh (1993) in her study conducted in the same district as this study. In the villages she visited, Greenhalgh also found a strong preference for two-child, mixed-sex families. Asked about why one son and one daughter are ideal, villagers gave distinct answers. The heavy economic burden was frequently mentioned as a barrier for having many children. The cost of sons is especially high owing to expensive items such as weddings and houses. As for old-age support, one son is sufficient because the parents can expect to live with him in their existing house. A two-son family, considered 'disastrous' by some villagers, must build an additional house. More importantly, there is a growing sense that sons are unreliable, and may not be willing to support their parents in old age. When there is only one son, he has a clear obligation. When there are more than one, domestic rivalry and dispute may cause great humiliation and even economic hardship for elderly parents. A daughter, in comparison, is desired largely for her crucial role in providing physical and emotional support.

In fact, the feasibility of old-age security with fewer children has already been explored in recent years by scholars with computerised simulation programs. Enke and Brown (1972) believed that the targets of birth control programs in developing countries to reduce fertility could be achieved without jeopardising the support in old age that most parents receive from their children. The compatibility between reduced fertility and

continued old-age support depends on the timing of births. In societies where sons are expected to provide support, they proposed an 'always a son' strategy, whereby parents have a son as soon as possible and then practise contraception so long as he survives. Such a strategy works because of the recent fall in infant and child mortality and the gain in people's life expectancy, as observed in most developing countries. For example, if life expectancy is 50 years, parents with no more than four children born can typically achieve a 0.9 probability of one son being alive when the father reaches age 65. In places where life expectancies are longer, parents can have still fewer children and yet be reasonably assured of a surviving son to support them in their old age. For parents, therefore, contraceptive use and spacing of births not only prevent unwanted births but reduce the number of births need for old-age support. For the population as a whole, the growth rate will drop accordingly.

Apparently, the 'always a son' strategy has far-reaching policy implications in China for a number of reasons, such as the strong preference for sons, low mortality and high life expectancy in relation to the average standard of developing countries, and explicit government policies promoting birth control and family support. In recent years, most suggestions by scholars to modify the One-Child policy follow a similar direction. For example, Bongaarts and Greenhalgh (1985) propound a two-child policy plus delayed childbearing as an alternative, to guarantee parents having at least one adult child to support them in old age. In practice, as identified by Greenhalgh (1986), China's birth control regulations enforced at local levels are often a combination of one- and two-child policies. While third and higher-order children are expressly discouraged, a second child is allowed for couples facing great hardship, provided they space at least four years between the first and the second. In the context of rural China, great hardship usually refers to having no sons. Therefore, the One-Child policy has been virtually 'peasantised' by village cadres with a more pragmatic One-Son policy (Greenhalgh, 1993).

Other scholars have proposed alternative means of providing old-age security in rural China, beyond family support and the population policy. Johnson (1994) asserted

that, by modifying current policies and promoting education at the primary and secondary levels, China would achieve lower fertility without strong family planning programs. One of the policies is to introduce a modest social security system. A rural pension program is financially attainable if given a reasonably high priority. By employing micro-simulation models of parity and kinship, Lin (1994) came to the conclusion from a micro-simulation model that rural families in the coming decades only have to cope with moderate levels of old-age dependency. For example, the proportion childless among rural women aged 65-69 will drop from eight per cent in 1990 to 2.5 per cent in 2030, thanks to reduced mortality. Very few households will have heavy old-age dependency burdens, just one per cent in 2030. He suggests a ladder of social security options for the government, beginning with programs designed to benefit those with the greatest difficulties, such as the childless elderly. Tian Xueyuan²⁵ suggested diverting the only-child insurance premiums currently paid by the government to a special old-age pension fund, in order to encourage couples to accept the one-child policy. A pilot program has already been launched in Sichuan province, in 1990 (Zhan, 1992).

6.2. Living arrangement expectations: ideal family size and structure

Family size and structure are often used as criteria to examine the form of living arrangements. It is straightforward that family size refers to the total number of persons in a family. In comparison, structure here refers to the number of generations in a family. In practice, however, there are several quite different meanings. For example, family size defined by the United Nations (1987) refers to the number of persons in a nuclear family, consisting generally of a man, his wife, and their children, while in countries like China where family household is commonly used, family size also includes all coresident family members who are related to the head by blood, marriage or adoption. When it comes to the discussion of completed family size, family size norms and family size preference in demography, family size is sometimes considered as a convenient shorthand for the number of children. Certainly, there is a close link between ideal number of children and

²⁵ Director of the Population Research Centre of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences

ideal number of all persons in a family. To avoid possible misunderstanding, the term 'fertility preference' is more frequently used than the term 'family size preference' in the comparative studies on the results of the World Fertility Survey (Lightbourne and MacDonald, 1982).

Family size preference as a social norm is considered consistent with the prevailing social institutions. For example, Freedman (1963) thought that the extent to which the family served basic social functions helped to determine the society's family size preference. Changes in fertility are unlikely without prior changes in these social norms and institutions. The concept of family size preference in ideal number of children has found wider applicability in fertility studies in recent years. Although some demographers doubt the feasibility of using survey data to predict fertility, it is generally accepted that family size preferences are indispensable in conceptual frameworks for analysing fertility level and behaviour (Davis and Blake, 1956; Freedman, 1975; Mason, 1983). Since this study is primarily concerned with family support for the elderly, or the availability of family members to provide the support, family size preference is here reflected in the ideal number of persons in a family household, in comparison to the ideal number of generations in a family household. In the context of rural China, whether respondents are willing to remain childless voluntarily is still an improper, if not an insulting, question. The demographic availability of potential providers of old-age support is usually taken for granted. The ideal number of children can be interpreted indirectly from the answers of ideal family size. It is worth noting that, in contrast to the explicit policy regulating people's fertility behaviour in terms of number of children, the government has made no attempts to limit real family size or reshape its structure. Nevertheless, as Zeng (1992) observed, there are implicit policies that favour the three-generation family for the sake of upholding the tradition of respecting and supporting the elderly. Generally speaking, changes in real family size and structure are still subject to a wider range of social and economic factors that are far more complicated and unpredictable than fertility *per se*.

Table 6.1 gives the percentage distribution of answers to the question about ideal number of persons in a family household, mean and its standard deviation by selected indicators of personal characteristics. Respondents included not only household heads, but also other family members aged 60 and above. Generally speaking, four-person households were most popular in the study area, favoured by about one-third of the respondents. Three-person households were chosen by another one-quarter of them. Altogether, nearly 60 per cent of respondents liked to live in small families with three or four persons. People who preferred large families with five or more persons accounted for another one-third. Only a small proportion (5.9 per cent) opted for households with two persons, a married couple presumably. That means, in terms of old-age support, the majority of respondents (94.1 per cent) expected that potential providers would be available at home. A second thought may be relevant to people's fertility desires. Assuming that a three-person household consists commonly of two parents and one child and a four-person household of two parents and two children, it is plausible to infer that a sizeable number of villagers have accepted the idea of the One-Child family, although the majority still wanted at least two children.

In Panel A of Table 6.1 age is divided into three groups: the young group aged from 18 to 39, the middle-aged group from 40 to 59, and the aged group of 60 and above. It is not surprising to find that small or nuclear family norms found widespread acceptance among young people, resulting in the lowest mean of 3.8. Nearly two-fifths of respondents in this group thought a three-person household, or a typical One-Child family, ideal. Together with those in favour of a four-person household, the small family with one or two children makes up 82.2 per cent of all preferences. The lowest standard deviation also underlines a higher degree of concentration. With an average number of persons in a household at four, the majority of people in middle ages (68.8 per cent) also agreed with small family norms, but were slightly less enthusiastic about the One-Child family idea. The elderly group has the highest mean number of 4.4, but their preference also seems quite diverse as shown by the high level of standard deviation. Over half chose to live in large households with five or more persons. It is worth noting that the elderly group has

Table 6.1: Percentage distribution of respondents to the question about ideal number of persons in household, by selected indicators, Pingling, 1996

Item	Ideal number of persons in family					Total	No.	Mean	Std.dev.
	2	3	4	5	6+				
A. Age group									
18-39	1.5	38.5	43.7	11.1	5.2	100.0	135	3.8	0.853
40-59	5.4	24.7	44.1	14.0	11.8	100.0	93	4.0	1.042
60+	9.3	17.0	21.4	25.8	26.4	100.0	182	4.4	1.297
B. Sex, under 60									
Males	3.7	36.5	40.2	13.2	6.3	100.0	189	3.8	0.934
Females	0.0	15.4	61.5	7.7	15.4	100.0	39	4.2	0.902
C. Sex, 60 and above									
Males	11.2	20.4	19.4	22.4	26.5	100.0	98	4.3	1.360
Females	7.1	13.1	23.8	29.8	26.2	100.0	84	4.5	1.126
D. Education									
Illiterate	8.8	17.5	21.9	25.5	26.3	100.0	137	4.4	1.288
Primary school	7.2	20.5	37.3	16.9	18.1	100.0	83	4.2	1.170
Junior high+	3.2	34.2	41.1	13.7	7.9	100.0	190	3.9	0.956
E. No. of generations in household									
1	20.0	28.0	28.0	14.0	10.0	100.0	50	3.6	1.239
2	4.8	37.4	49.0	6.1	2.7	100.0	147	3.6	0.783
3+	3.3	17.4	24.9	27.7	26.8	100.0	217	4.6	1.154
F. Living standard									
Poor	15.8	31.6	42.1	0.0	10.5	100.0	19	3.6	1.121
Average	5.9	20.8	36.3	20.4	16.6	100.0	289	4.2	1.128
Well-to-do	3.8	28.8	28.8	20.0	18.8	100.0	80	4.2	1.166
Wealthy	4.5	77.3	13.6	0.0	4.5	100.0	22	3.2	0.752
All	5.9	25.9	33.9	18.3	16.1	100.0		4.1	1.143
No.	24	106	139	75	66		410		

Source: Household survey data

the highest proportion not only among those favouring a large family (52.2 per cent), but also among those favouring the other extreme of two-person household (9.3 per cent). It is not difficult to explain the former phenomenon, since the influence of traditional norms is still quite strong among the elderly. The puzzle is why some aged people opted for a single or two-person household. Information from personal interviews shows that old people's opinion on living arrangements seemed to be influenced by the situation they were trapped in. To a certain extent, the ideal might be just a reluctant admission of the

reality. By contrast, few people of younger generations could imagine that they would end up living alone.

The means in Panels B and C of Table 6.1 indicate that larger families were more preferred by women in the study area, whereas two-person families were more preferred by males. To see the effect of sex in detail, the respondents were divided into two groups: those aged under 60 and those aged 60 and above. The general preference for large families was still detectable in the old age group, as discussed in the previous paragraph. The young age group shows a different pattern. Although both men and women favoured small families, women were more likely to choose four-person household than three-person families. This implies that, although small-family norms were quite popular among younger generations, the One-Child norm found more approval among males than females. The difference in family size preference in general, and acceptance of the One-Child policy in particular, between males and females reflects their respective status and roles both at home and in society. Men are usually more outwardly oriented, better educated, financially more independent, and more open to new ideas. In societies like that of China where government influence is very strong, men are more likely to be convinced or exposed to pressure first, because of their active involvement in social life. In contrast, women are usually family oriented and have fewer external opportunities or connections. Their preference for a larger family can be explained not only by persisting traditional values, but by practical financial and emotional needs as well.

It is well documented in previous literature that modern education is an effective vehicle for the dissemination of small-family norms. In Panel D of Table 6.1 the level of education is divided into three groups: illiterate, primary school, junior high school and above. The means of preferred number of persons in a family decrease from 4.4 among the illiterate to 3.9 among those who have at least junior high school education. The shrinking standard deviation (from 1.288 to 0.956) indicates that the higher the educational level, the more clustered the ideal value. In the high-education group, for example, when the ideal number of persons in a household moves up by one category from four to five, the

approval rate dropped sharply from 41.1 to 13.7 per cent. The proportion of those who still preferred families with six or more persons is less than one-third of that observed in the illiterate group. Needless to say, the age factor must be taken into account here, since in the study area age is negatively related to the educational level. As shown in Table 4.1, 72.9 per cent of old people aged 60 and over fell into the illiterate category. Therefore, old people's preference is consistent with their education level.

In Panel E in Table 6.1 household structure is divided into three groups: single-generation, two-generation and multi-generation of three and above. The mean number of persons in a family is the same for the first two groups, only the ideal value of the two-generation households is more concentrated as shown in the smaller standard deviation. In the multi-generation group the mean increased by one person to 4.6. This indicates that people in the study area were more likely to favour family size compatible with the structure they currently lived in. For example, 86.4 per cent of the two-generation group preferred small families with three or four persons, while 54.5 per cent of the multi-generation group picked up large families with five or more persons. As far as the ideal is concerned, or excluding premature death or divorce, only large families can make multi-generation living likely. A three-generation household should consist at least of five persons: two grandparents, two parents and one child, an interesting variant of the One-Child family promoted by the government.

Living standard in the questionnaire is roughly divided into four groups in Panel F of Table 6.1: poor, average, well-to-do and wealthy, according to respondents' personal judgement in relation to local economic conditions. The survey reveals no statistically significant relationship between living standard and people's family size preference. The means suggest that people from both extremes, poor and wealthy, preferred smaller families. The wealthy group has the highest preference for three-person households. It is plausible that poor families could not afford a large family, whereas wealthy families chose not to have more children. The majority who considered their standard of living as average or well-to-do were in favour of larger households. This suggests that living standard has a

dual effect on people’s fertility preference. As living standard rises, it may encourage some people to want more children and others to want fewer. The relationship appears to be negative only after the family reaches a higher standard of living.

Table 6.2: Percentage distribution of respondents to the question about ideal number of generations in household, by selected indicators, Pingling, 1996

Item	Ideal number of generations in family			Total	No.	Mean	Std.dev.
	1	2	3+				
A. Age group							
18-39	0.7	48.1	51.2	100.0	135	2.5	0.517
40-59	3.2	29.0	67.7	100.0	93	2.6	0.545
60+	5.5	14.3	80.2	100.0	182	2.7	0.548
B. Sex, under 60							
Males	2.1	38.6	59.3	100.0	189	2.6	0.537
Females	0.0	48.7	51.3	100.0	39	2.5	0.506
C. Sex, 60 and above							
Males	6.1	11.2	82.7	100.0	98	2.8	0.552
Females	4.8	17.9	77.5	100.0	84	2.7	0.546
D. Education							
Illiterate	5.1	16.1	78.8	100.0	137	2.7	0.546
Primary school	3.6	22.9	73.5	100.0	83	2.7	0.535
Junior high+	2.1	40.5	57.4	100.0	190	2.5	0.539
E. No. of generations in household							
1	12.0	32.0	56.0	100.0	50	2.4	0.705
2	2.0	44.2	53.7	100.0	147	2.5	0.541
3+	2.3	17.4	80.3	100.0	213	2.8	0.469
F. Living standard							
Poor	10.5	42.1	47.4	100.0	19	2.4	0.684
Average	3.5	28.7	67.8	100.0	293	2.6	0.547
Well-to-do	2.5	23.8	73.8	100.0	80	2.7	0.508
Wealthy	0.0	36.4	63.6	100.0	22	2.6	0.492
All	3.4	28.8	67.8	100.0		2.6	0.546
No.	14	118	278		410		

Source: Household survey data

Table 6.2 gives the percentage distribution of answers to the question of ideal number of generations in a household, the mean and its standard deviation by selected indicators of personal characteristics. Ideal number of generations in a household is divided into three categories: one, two, and three and above. Over two-thirds of

respondents preferred to live in a stem household consisting of three generations. Two-generation households were also popular, with an approval rate of 28.8 per cent. Very few people (3.4 per cent) chose to live in a single-generation household. The mean number of generations in a household is about 2.6. This dominant preference for coresidence of three generations remains little changed when broken down by five independent variables: age, sex, education, number of generations in current household, and living standard. Together with those favouring two-generation households, the proportion of respondents who expected coresidence with children reached 96.6 per cent. Clearly, minor variations still exist. For example, as people aged, they were more likely to choose living alone or in a stem household. The higher the education people obtained, the more likely they were to choose to live in a nuclear family of two generations. Generally speaking, people were more likely to favour the structure that was compatible to their current living arrangements.

Table 6.3: Correlation coefficients between dependent and selected independent variables (p<0.05)

Independent variables	Dependent variables	
	No. of persons	No of generations
Age	0.2699	0.2328
Sex	0.1720	
Education	-0.2384	-0.1828
No. of generations	0.3174	0.2375
Living standard		

Table 6.3 shows the correlation coefficients to look at the independent effect of age, sex, education, the number of generations in the current family and living standard on the two dependent variables: the ideal number of persons and generation in a family. It seems that age and the current number of generations in the household have the strongest positive effect on people’s preferences for family size and structure. The influence of education is also visible, but from an opposite direction. If males are coded as 0 and females as 1, there seems to be a positive but weak association (0.172) between sex and the ideal number of persons. Such an association is not significant when it comes to the ideal number of generations. The relationship between living standard and people’s

preference for family size and structure is not evident. It is worth noting that living standard itself is sometimes influenced by other socio-demographic factors. More often it is used as a dependent variable rather than an independent variable in social science studies.

From the household survey results, it is evident that the small family norm in terms of ideal number of persons in a household has been widely accepted by villagers in the study area. Over two-thirds of respondents thought small families with four persons at most are ideal. Preferences for family structure in terms of ideal number of generations in a household reveal that a considerable proportion of people (67.8 per cent) were in favour of multi-generation households. The fact that very few people preferred two-person or single-generation households indicates that independent living as observed commonly among the elderly in other industrialised countries is not going to be a popular choice of rural people in the near future.

Perhaps the most surprising finding from the household survey is the inconsistency between the ideal number of persons and the ideal number of generations in a family household. As discussed above, a three-generation household should consist of at least five persons: two grandparents, two parents and one child. Obviously, this runs counter to the popular choice of the ideal number of persons in a family at no more than four. Of course, for a three-generation stem household, a combination of four members is possible, but far from ideal according to Chinese traditions, which always see premature death of family members or dissolution of a marriage as a tragedy. This inconsistency can possibly explained in this way. On the one hand, because of the changing social and economic situations in general, and the government's explicit birth control targets in particular, the majority of villagers might have changed their fertility desires from having many children to having fewer children, as reflected in the popularity of small-family norms. On the other hand, people still thought coresidence in a multi-generation household ideal. As discussed previously, the inconsistency in government policies is likewise apparent, promoting both birth control and family support for the elderly in rural areas. Given the general acceptance

of small-family norms and the popular approval for multi-generation households at the grassroots level, it seems to be possible to reconcile the two inconsistent sets by encouraging young couples to have fewer children but still coreside with elderly parents.

6.3. Expectations of coresidence

At the present stage, coresidence is the most popular and practical form of family support for the elderly in rural China. As indicated in the household survey results discussed previously, respondents showed a strong preference for coresidence with children, in terms of the ideal number of persons in the household as well as the ideal number of generations in the household. The proportion of people expecting to live in a three-generation household is especially high. Only a small number of people favoured living independently either in a two-person household or a single-generation household. In the household survey, respondents were further asked about their attitude toward coresidence, which would provide more insights into rural people’s expectation for old-age support in future.

Table 6.4 presents the percentage distribution of responses to the question whether young people should coreside with elderly parents after marriage by selected indicators of personal characteristics. The total number of respondents, 378, is smaller than the 410 which appeared in Tables 6.1 and 6.2, because those who ticked ‘don’t know’ were omitted from discussions here. As can be seen, the majority of respondents gave an affirmative answer to the question raised. People who did not agree with the idea accounted for less than one-third. In terms of distribution, the results quite agree with the pattern shown in Table 6.2, of nearly two-thirds of respondents preferring multi-generation households.

When broken down into different socio-demographic groups, the general pattern basically remains. However, slight variations are still visible. For example, the approval rate seems to increase by age, from 68 per cent in the young group to 75.7 per cent in the

Table 6.4. Percentage distribution of responses to the question whether young people should coreside with elderly parents, by selected indicators, Pingling, 1996

Item	Yes	No	Total	No.
A. Age group				
18-39	68.0	32.0	100.0	125
40-59	70.2	29.8	100.0	84
60+	75.7	24.3	100.0	169
B. Sex, under 60				
Males	64.4	35.6	100.0	174
Females	91.4	8.6	100.0	35
C. Sex, 60 and above				
Males	75.0	25.0	100.0	92
Females	76.6	23.4	100.0	77
D. Education				
Illiterate	76.8	23.2	100.0	125
Primary school	66.2	33.8	100.0	77
Junior high+	70.8	29.2	100.0	178
E. No. of generations in household				
1	40.9	59.1	100.0	44
2	59.7	40.3	100.0	129
3+	86.3	13.7	100.0	205
F. Living standard				
Poor	81.3	18.8	100.0	16
Average	72.7	27.3	100.0	268
Well-to-do	73.7	26.3	100.0	76
Wealthy	50.0	50.0	100.0	22
All	72.0	28.0	100.0	
No.	272	106		378

Source: Household survey data

aged group, as displayed in Panel A of Table 6.4. This suggests a weakened willingness among rural youths to coreside with elderly parents. Understandably, young people are more willing to embrace new concepts and values associated with modernisation and Westernisation in the era of market-oriented reforms. As discussed in Chapter 5, the 'conjugal' pattern of family life has become increasingly popular among young people in the study area; this gives more emphasis to the husband-wife bond than the parent-son obligation. Here the demographic factor is also important. The present-day youth belong to the baby-boomer generation, and most of them have a large number of surviving

siblings, perhaps the largest on average in China's modern history. For an individual, the probability of living separately from parents is high, given the fact that Chinese parents usually live with just one married son and his family. It is likely that, in the foreseeable future, the approval rate for coresidence among young couples will continue to decline from the current high level of 68 per cent. It takes time for the baby-boom effect of the 1950s and the 1960s to fade away gradually.

Generally speaking, women were more likely than men to value coresidence, particularly women in the younger generation, as shown in Panels B and C of Table 6.4. While the gender difference is small in the aged group, it is more apparent in the young group: the approval rate among females is 1.4 times as high as that among males. This indicates that, even among younger women, the family orientation was still strong in the study area. In coresidence with the elderly, young women usually provide important physical and emotional support, so that family care is even called female care (UN, 1994). In the meantime, they also benefit from coresidence at a time of increased female participation in the labour force. As observed from the study site, the inter-generational assistance often took the form that young women went to work in the daytime while elderly parents (or parents-in-law) stayed home doing baby-sitting and housework. As discussed in Chapter 5, old women were more likely to coreside with a married son and his family. The high approval rate among younger women suggests that they might also expect to coreside with children in old age. The qualitative information shows that younger women in the study area have become increasingly influential in family decision-making. If they remain committed continuously, the present-day younger women will become a powerful backing force to support coresidence not only now, but in the foreseeable future.

There are no consistent patterns when the education factor is taken into consideration, as presented in Panel D of Table 6.4. The highest approval rate for coresidence is found in the illiterate group. It quite agrees with that observed in the aged group, because the majority of old persons in the study area have no schooling. Of the two

educated groups, the approval rate among those who received at least junior high school education is higher than that among those who graduated from primary schools. This is compatible with the observation of officials of the District Committee on Ageing that people of higher education tend to retain filial respect and treat their parents well. There are two plausible reasons. They may have a higher level of moral conscience that values providing for the elderly as a virtue, or a better understanding of government policies and laws that emphasise the family's obligations in old-age support.

People's current form of living arrangements has a clear effect on their approval of coresidence: the more generations in the household, the higher the approval rate, as suggested in Panel E of Table 6.4. The proportion who agreed with coresidence in the multi-generation households is twice as high as that in the single-generation households. In comparison, the effect of living standard is not as obvious in Panel F of Table 6.4. It seems that people from wealthy families were less enthusiastic about coresidence.

Obviously, the reason for approving coresidence varies from person to person, and from family to family. In the household survey, respondents were also asked to choose from a list the reasons that most agreed with their personal or family situation. Table 6.5 only covers those who favoured coresidence, smaller in total number compared with Table 6.4. Those who disagreed or had no idea were omitted. Since each person was allowed to tick as many reasons as possible, each percentage entry in the table only illustrates its relation to the total number of persons in the corresponding category. A percentage total is meaningless in this situation. The seven pre-identified reasons for supporting coresidence are: (1) to continue family traditions; (2) to facilitate inter-generational assistance and care; (3) to enhance family influence in the community; (4) to minimise living costs; (5) to cope with housing shortage; (6) to improve management of household economy; and (7) other reasons.

As presented in Table 6.5, to facilitate inter-generational assistance and care is the most frequently chosen answer on the reason for coresidence. Overall, 95.6 per cent of the

272 respondents considered it the major reason for supporting coresidence, three times higher than the next answer: to continue family traditions. Cost of living and housing conditions were also considered important by around ten per cent of the respondents. In comparison, other reasons listed in the questionnaire only have limited bearing on the topic. It can be concluded with certainty that inter-generational assistance is the dominant reason for people to value coresidence in the study area, followed by continuity of family traditions.

Table 6.5. Percentage distribution of responses, by reasons for supporting coresidence, by selected indicators, Pingling, 1996

Item	Reasons for coresidence ^a							No.
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
A. Age group								
18-39	25.9	96.5	1.2	15.3	16.5	9.4	1.2	85
40-59	30.5	98.3	1.7	0.0	1.7	3.4	1.7	59
60+	24.2	93.8	3.9	11.7	10.9	6.3	2.3	128
B. Sex								
Males	28.2	94.5	2.8	12.2	14.4	7.7	2.2	181
Females	22.0	97.8	2.2	6.6	3.3	4.4	1.1	91
C. Education								
Illiterate	26.0	94.8	4.2	9.4	6.3	4.2	2.1	96
Primary school	15.7	98.0	2.0	5.9	9.8	9.8	2.0	51
Junior high+	31.8	94.9	2.0	14.0	16.4	9.5	2.0	124
E. No. of generations in household								
1	22.2	88.9	5.6	0.0	0.0	5.6	5.6	18
2	29.9	96.1	2.6	6.5	9.1	7.8	0.0	77
3+	24.9	96.0	2.3	13.0	12.4	6.2	2.3	177
F. Living standard								
Poor	7.7	100.0	0.0	7.7	7.7	7.7	0.0	13
Average	20.3	97.4	2.6	5.2	4.7	3.6	1.6	192
Well-to-do	46.4	91.1	0.0	25.0	21.4	10.7	3.6	56
Wealthy	45.5	81.8	18.2	27.3	13.6	36.4	0.0	11
All	26.1	95.6	2.6	10.3	10.7	6.6	1.8	272

Source: Household survey data

^aNote: 1=Family tradition; 2=Inter-generational assistance and care; 3=Family influence; 4=Living cost; 5=Housing conditions; 6=Management of the household economy; 7=Others.

The general patterns dominated by inter-generational assistance remain largely unchanged in all socio-demographic categories, with only minor variations. The effect of age is not consistent, as shown in Panel A of Table 6.5. People of all three age groups gave high value to inter-generational assistance. Of course, to people in each group, the advantage of coresidence comes in different forms. The elderly benefit primarily from economic, physical and emotional support provided by family members of younger generations, while adult children benefit from a helping hand offered by parents. Compared with the middle-aged, people of the younger and older groups reported more concerns about the household economy in terms of living costs and housing conditions. Panel B displays little gender difference when it comes to inter-generational assistance. Nevertheless, a higher proportion among males than females found the family tradition and economic considerations important as well. In rural China where the patriarchal influence is strong, men are usually more aware of their family obligations. Similarly, men being more conscious of economics stems from the fact that they take more responsibility as household heads or the main bread winners in the family. It is interesting to find that inter-generational assistance is emphasised even by people who live in single- and two-generation households, presented in Panel C. As for people from the multi-generation households, their other concerns about living costs and household conditions are understandable, because the benefit of coresidence is more evident in such living arrangements. Panel D indicates that inter-generational assistance found wide approval among people of different educational backgrounds. People in the high-education category were more conscious than others of family traditions and economic considerations. This suggests that modern education and traditional values are not necessarily mutually exclusive. In living standard category, as illustrated in Panel E, people from richer families were more concerned about traditional values and economic benefits of coresidence. Family traditions were mentioned by nearly half of people from the well-to-do and wealthy families, the highest proportion in all groups. The cost of living, housing conditions and management of the household economy were also mentioned by a large number of people in these two groups. It is worth noting that family influence and household economy management have also been thought of as benefits of coresidence by a few people of the

wealthy group. This can be explained from an opposite direction: a large, influential family is able to optimise the household economy, resulting in better returns or greater profits.

Inter-generational assistance and care as the dominant reason for people favouring coresidence is also evident from the focus-group discussions, particularly among the elderly participants. It seems that, in coresidence, old people were more concerned about the availability of physical and emotional support in case of illness or disability than insufficiency in economic support. Their demand for specific material support is moderate, usually no more than the basics of subsistence. In comparison, companionship with family members and the satisfaction of being able to fulfil traditional social roles in coresidence were highly valued.

Participant 1: When people age, they need someone to be around. Health permitting, few old persons sit idle at home. If not (permitting), what they want is just a meal.

Participant 2: Old people don't expect children waiting at table all the time. It's fine as long as they remain filial in heart and care how parents feel in hot or in cold.

Participant 3: For old people it is not easy to bring up a child. Now, they also look after grandchildren. When parents fall sick, it would be good if the daughter-in-law comes and serves a cup of tea (Focus discussion group, elderly males).

As found from the household survey, over one-quarter of respondents (28 per cent) did not favour young couples living continuously with their parents after marriage. The proportion is especially high among younger generations. In rural China, individuals have only limited power to choose living arrangements according to their personal preference or taste. The decision is commonly made by the family, or negotiated among family members. People's ideal does not necessarily mean what they eventually get. However, it seems that, were young people given a chance, a sizeable number in the study area would choose separate living. In fact, the majority of married young couples in the study area did live in a separate residence, because parents usually only coreside with one of the many siblings. In the focus-group discussions, some participants also talked about the disadvantages of coresidence. The most frequently mentioned disadvantage is

bufangbian (inconvenience), a typical Chinese term for lack of privacy and personal freedom. Other reasons include conflicts between in-laws and housework burden. This suggests that family division is usually caused by social reasons rather than economic reasons, although some domestic disputes may be attributed to economic problems in the first place. As for its relevance to old-age support, children living separately may mean fewer people available at home for physical and emotional support, but not necessarily for economic support.

6.4. Old-age support strategies: whom to rely on?

In spite of the inevitable effects of modernisation and the government's social engineering programs over the last few decades, the family still played a central role in providing for the elderly in the study area. Family support, mostly in the form of coresidence, includes not only economic assistance to parents throughout old age, but also physical care and emotional relief when they become unable to survive on their own. The present-day elderly belong to a unique generation in China. They are not so lucky, because few of them were able to obtain their own old-age security through assets accumulating activities in their working life during the commune period. On the other hand, because they have on average a large number of surviving children, perhaps the largest in China's modern history, they are fortunate to have a large number of potential providers, at least in theory. There are two more factors that facilitate the potential providers materialising their support obligations: their improved financial capability thanks to the recent market-oriented reforms, and the government's explicit policy that promotes family support. Therefore, the majority of the present-day elderly can enjoy a relatively secure later life. As for the very few who fell into poverty because of childlessness or neglect by unfilial children, certain community assistance is still available.

For people now in their adult years, the security situation in their old age is less certain, because they have fewer children to count on for support. The current young adult cohorts are also unique in China's modern history. First, the total number of this

generation is the largest, because of the baby booms in the 1950s and 1960s. Second, it is the first generation whose fertility behaviour has been directly influenced or manipulated by government birth control policies. Third, people of this generation are not only experiencing but also contributing to the most drastic changes associated with modernisation. Their ideas, values and conduct will have profound policy implications for family planning and family support.

Table 6.6. Percentage distribution of respondents under 60, by expected form of old-age support, by selected indicators, Pingling, 1996

Item	Expected source of support ^a				Total	No.
	1	2	3	4		
A. Age group						
18-39	54.1	17.8	27.4	0.7	100.0	135
40-59	54.8	24.7	19.4	1.1	100.0	93
B. Sex						
Males	54.5	22.8	21.7	1.1	100.0	189
Females	53.8	10.3	35.9	0.0	100.0	39
C. Education						
Illiterate	50.0	25.0	25.0	0.0	100.0	12
Primary school	55.8	27.9	16.3	0.0	100.0	43
Junior high+	54.3	18.5	26.0	1.2	100.0	173
D. No. of generations in household						
1	44.4	44.4	11.1	0.0	100.0	9
2	56.9	19.2	23.8	0.0	100.0	130
3+	51.7	20.2	25.8	2.2	100.0	89
E Living standard						
Poor	53.8	30.8	15.4	0.0	100.0	13
Average	55.4	16.9	27.0	0.7	100.0	148
Well-to-do	52.0	24.0	24.0	0.0	100.0	50
Wealthy	52.9	35.3	5.9	5.9	100.0	17
All	54.4	20.6	24.1	0.9	100.0	
No.	124	47	55	2		228

Source: Household survey data

^aNote: 1=Family; 2=Self-support; 3=Shared responsibility; 4=Others.

In the household survey, respondents aged under 60 were asked whence they expected to receive major economic support in old age. In the context of rural China, four categories were pre-identified: mainly the family; mainly self, including insurance

programs; shared responsibility between the family and the community; and other sources. Here family support refers primarily to children's support. As shown in Table 6.6, the family remains the most popular choice of support source. Over half of the respondents (54.4 per cent) expected the family to provide major support. The second most frequently mentioned option is shared responsibility between the family and the community. This is compatible with the government policy that in rural areas the family bears the major responsibility of old-age support and the community provides necessary assistance. Altogether, those who expected family support with community assistance accounted for 78.5 per cent of the total. However, still a sizeable number of respondents, about one-fifth of the total, believed in self-support and insurance programs. In recent years, some rural communities in the developed coastal regions have become wealthy enough to establish their own pension programs. Old people in the community are entitled to a monthly pension benefit of 60-100 *Yuan*. In the study area, however, such community-based pension programs are currently still non-existent; but local governments have helped to introduce a number of old-age insurance programs on a 'user-pay' basis. Therefore, these programs can be seen as a form of self-support. Very few persons, only two of the total 228, chose the 'others' category which refers primarily to the public pension benefits enjoyed by public servants and workers in state-owned enterprises. Rural residents are not covered by this program at the present stage. The two persons may work in a state-owned factory, and, therefore, be eligible for the pension coverage.

6.4.1. Family support and the children

In Table 6.6, the share of people who expected the family to be the main provider of economic support remains relatively constant, slightly higher than 50 per cent, across the full spectrum of groups. Although not high compared with the nearly 80 per cent of the present-day elderly depending on children for support (see Table 5.7), it indicates that family support, provided mainly by children, was still popular among the majority of working age adults. Here the demographic availability of children is a principal concern. However, the concern with old-age security did not translate to a noticeable preference for

a large family. As discussed above, a sizeable proportion of villagers have accepted the idea of One-Child family, although the majority still want at least two children (Table 6.1). Obviously, desired fertility and current fertility are two separate concepts. For the respondents, there is also a difference between the ideal number of children and the number of children they already have. For example, of the 151 married women under 40 in Nanshangzhao, 139 had at least one child at the time of my fieldwork, resulting in an average of 2.1. In the face of a renewed effort to enforce birth control targets in the study area, as discussed in Chapter 3, it is unlikely that those who have two or more children will continue childbearing. However, it is not so sure whether or not mothers of a single-child will proceed to additional births. Among the participants of focus-group discussions, one child per couple was clearly not a popular idea, but too many children were not preferred, either.

Participant 1: For such a large country, how come people have just one child? I still think it's better to have at least two. Food is not a problem. One person does not consume much.

Participant 2: It depends. There should not be too many dependants (in the family). Now two people working can hardly support three children. Just imagine how to cope if you have five or six as before (Focus discussion group, elderly males).

Participant 1: Two boys are enough. If something happens, parents still have one left to rely on.

Participant 2: Life is short. Had you five or six children like in old times, they would consume all your time (Focus discussion group, young males).

Participant 1: Once you got a boy, that's enough. Just can't afford too many, the (economic) burden multiplies (Focus discussion group, young females).

Information from focus-group discussions confirms the pattern revealed in the survey data that most people in the study area preferred two children, providing one of them is a boy. It is interesting that, while expressing their disagreement with the One-Child idea, respondents quickly added that it was their own opinion, not an attempt to dispute government policies. The Party line has to be respected, at least in principle. The preference for the two-child family is compatible with that found by Greenhalgh (1993) in

her study in the same district. However, there was no obvious suggestion that the ideal sex combination of children should be one son and one daughter.

The son preference is still strong in the study area, as illustrated in a local saying: *yi zi ding renxin* (people become assured only after a boy is born). The predominant view was that sons are needed as manpower, followed by old-age support and the tradition. The fact that old-age security motive *per se* takes a secondary position in people’s fertility desires agrees with the observation of Bulatao (1981) that it probably does not explain variation among desires for small families. China is unique only because small family norms are largely induced by government interventions. The influence of old-age security considerations becomes increasingly weak when the number of children a couple can have is artificially limited by government policies. In fact, as an old man pointed out, old-age support cannot be guaranteed without sufficient able-bodied labourers at home. ‘In farm work, two daughters are not as good as a son’, added he. Watering farm plots was often mentioned during focus-group discussions as one of the major farming tasks that only young men can perform. As introduced in Chapter 3, over 80 per cent of the land in the study area is irrigated, thanks to the near-by Weihui Irrigation Canal. However, the water use is strictly regulated. Each village can only use the water during a specific period according to a schedule handed down from the management office. During this period, sometimes far into the night, every family has to do its best to complete the watering on time. Physically, women are not considered capable for the job. There are also safety reasons for not allowing women to go out at night.

Table 6.7. Distribution of married women under 40, by number and sex of children, Pingling, 1996

	Number and sex of children ^a										Total	
	One child		Two children				Three children					Others
	b	g	bb	gg	bg	gb	bbb	ggg	bbg	ggb		
No. of women	20	12	21	4	15	25	1	7	4	10	20	139

Source: Secondary data collected in Nanshangzhao

^a: b=Boy; g=Girl.

The son preference and the desire for at least two children can be detected from the birth records of married women under 40 in Nanshangzhao, as presented in Table 6.7. Among the 139 women with children, 76.9 per cent have more than one child and 83.5 per cent have at least one son. According to the current policy, the 12 women with girls only are allowed to have another try after a four-year interval. In practice, the spacing policy is not always strictly observed. It is likely that most of them would take the chance sooner, if they indeed wanted to try a second time. Once women with more than one child are taken into account, the proportion with at least one son reaches 89.7 per cent. Of the 65 women with two children, 36 gave birth to a boy first and 29 a girl first. Gender seems to have little influence in women's decision to proceed from the first to the second parity. While 21 women are happy with two boys, only four women with two girls stopped. Among women with three children, those who have already two girls are 3.4 times more likely than those with two boys to have an additional child. Four women with three girls even tried a fourth time. Therefore, most of the present-day young adults in the study area will end up in old age with at least two children as potential providers, and with at least one son to coreside eventually. The number of childless couples will be extremely small.

For parents expecting family support, as De Vos (1985) asserted, there is a net economic cost to having children and a trade-off between quantity and quality of children. As commonly believed by focus-group participants, the costs of raising children has increased sharply in recent years, particularly for education and health care. Rural primary schools in the study area are managed by the community and the teachers are paid by the government. Still, students have to pay a variety of miscellaneous fees, 70 *Yuan* per semester in 1996. High schools charge even more. In spite of the rising cost, parents still want their children to get as much education as possible. The enrolment rate of primary school children has remained 100 per cent for years. The majority of the focus-group participants wanted their children to finish at least junior high school, since they themselves are mostly junior high school graduates. The typical view is that society changes so fast that having no education simply does not work any longer. Nevertheless, boys were more likely to enjoy preferential treatments. In the case of a son, the parents are

usually determined to support him with all their resources all the way to college, as long as he can pass the entrance examination. As for a girl, it is time for her to get married after completing junior high school. It seems that people still want to invest more in sons than daughters, since the economic potential of sons is generally greater than that of daughters who will marry out anyway. With good education, children are commonly expected to find a job in the cities. 'No matter what job, it is better than staying in the village', a young woman stated. The striking new emphasis on the education of children suggests that a shift in preferences from quantity to 'quality' of children is well under way in the study area²⁶. It is worth noting that this spontaneous trade-off strategy among villagers is surprisingly consistent with the targets of the government's family planning and education promotion programs in rural areas. Educated people are more likely not only to have sufficient means to support parents, but also to have fewer children themselves.

6.4.2. Community assistance and self-support

Figures in Table 6.6 suggest that the working age adults in the study area expected less financial dependency on family in old age. In the meantime, their interest in other alternative sources of support increased: community assistance and self-support, including insurance programs. At the present stage, the assistance the community can provide in the study area is limited, primarily to the childless elderly under the Five-Guarantee system. The high proportion of people expecting a shared responsibility between the family and the community in old-age support can be interpreted as a hope for the community to take an increasingly important part in providing financial assistance to families in crisis. This reflects to a certain extent rural people's worries about the possible risks and uncertainties in the new-found family farming and market economy, with which individual families are hardly in a position to cope independently. As discussed previously, most of the institutional conditions identified by Nugent (1985) in his arguments for the old-age security-fertility hypothesis can still be found in the study area. In old times, parents might

²⁶ Not only the 'quality' in terms of education, parents were also concerned about their children's 'quality' in terms of health. In Nanshangzhao, as many as 40 households have bought health insurance policies for their children.

choose to have many children as 'insurance' for crisis management. Nowadays, in the presence of strong birth control programs, such a strategy becomes less applicable, if not totally impossible. Therefore, it is natural for people to hope the community will act as some sort of safety net. In fact, there were a number of welfare programs during the commune period, such as the Five-Guarantees system and the co-operative health care system. Unfortunately, most programs ceased to work after the commune broke up. The survey finding shows that there is a demand among villagers to restore or strengthen the community-based social welfare programs. In recent years, lack of funds is a major problem that hampers the development of such programs. At the present stage, the priority of local governments lies in continuous efforts to promote the rural economy and expand the pool for fund-raising.

The household survey indicates that about 20 per cent of the elderly currently support themselves with their own labour income or with limited assistance from children (Table 5.7). In comparison, a similar proportion among the younger generation expected that they would rely financially on self-support in old age. The difference is only minimal. This may in part stem from a conviction that financial independence is more important than living arrangements. Even in coresidence, the elderly can still remain independent financially. There are two common points made by the focus-group participants for people choosing self-support: uncertainty about children's availability or willingness to provide support, and confidence in providing for old-age security during the working life. For example, the highest proportion of people expecting self-support can be found in the wealthy group in Panel E of Table 6.6.

Participant 1: Nobody can be sure if the children are reliable for old-age support in future. It is OK if they remain loyal. If not, there is social pressure. Anyway, nobody is certain.

Participant 2: You have already got your house built, what else (do you) worry about? How much can one eat in his later years? Anyway, the family plot is always there (Focus discussion group, young males).

Ms. Bian (my host in Nanshangzhao): I prefer to live separately from my children. It has nothing to do with whether I love them or not. After all, I don't want to mix up with them in money matters (Focus discussion group, young females).

In the study area, the family house is still the largest part of the private assets villagers can accumulate and inherit. That is why people keep renovating or rebuilding their houses, from brick to cement structures, from one-storey to two-storey buildings, and from outside decoration to internal design, to continuously add to the value. In a situation where a capital and investment market is still non-existent, a house is the most reliable guarantee for old-age security. Another long-term strategy of old-age security is to invest in the family land plot, such as by ameliorating soil quality, improving the irrigation system, and even converting the plot into orchards. As discussed in Chapter 3, land is still nominally community-owned, only to be allocated to families on a per capita basis. Each person in the family has the same land rights under his or her own name. Since the contracted plot is not sellable, people can enjoy the return of their investment for a relatively long period.

Previously, as discussed in Chapter 1, formal pension programs only existed in cities, covering mainly public servants and workers in the state-owned factories. In the study area, two old-age insurance programs have also been introduced in recent years: the Rural Social Pension Insurance Program (*nongcun shehui yanglao baoxian*), managed by a special government body, and the Happiness Old-Age Insurance Policy (*xinfu yanglaojin baoxian*), run by the People's Insurance Company of China largely on a commercial basis. Nationally, the Rural Social Pension Insurance Program was established in 1991 to extend old-age pension coverage to farmers and workers in township enterprises in rural areas. In Shaanxi, according to the 1995 statistics collected from the Provincial Department of Civil Affairs, 80 of the total of 107 counties have launched their pilot projects. Farmers can choose the level of premium and benefit in accordance with their own conditions. The monthly contribution ranges from two to 20 *Yuan*, and the policy-holders are entitled to the benefits after reaching 60 years of age. Largely on a user-pays basis, the program also enjoys a number of preferential treatments from the

government, such as tax exemption. In Pingling, a township official was nominated to take charge of the pilot project in the area under the leadership of the District Department of Civil Affairs. Six persons in Nanshangzhao have already joined the program. Most participants in the focus-group discussions knew something about the program, and they were also willing to take a policy. This indicates that people in the study area have started to realise the advantages of modern institutions in securing old-age support quite differently from the traditional ways. The reason why not many villagers had participated so far was uncertainty about the result, according to the prevailing opinion. People wanted to wait and see if the money is really worth spending. Understandably, the concept is new to villagers and the program itself is still in its infancy. Even officials of the relevant departments are not quite confident whether the insurance fund can be managed in a professional way under such volatile and defective market conditions. It takes time for the management to convince villagers that their money is well spent.

Since the introduction of the One-Child policy in the early 1980s, local governments have offered a number of economic incentives to couples agreeing to have only one child, such as better access to health care and education. In practice, such incentives do not look attractive enough, since few people prefer to have a single child. In the recent efforts to curtail high-parity births, a new two-daughter pension program was introduced. Influenced by the strong son preference in the study area, two-daughter families are thought most likely to have a third child, as illustrated in Table 6.7. To persuade such couples to stop at two, the program offers old-age pension benefits, 60 *Yuan* per month beginning at age 60. Three parties will share the first premium instalment of 600 *Yuan*: the township government, the villagers' committee and the couple involved. In Nanshangzhao, only one couple has accepted the offer and undergone sterilisation. As in the case of the Rural Social Pension Insurance Program, people are reluctant to join largely because most of them really have no way of knowing how adequate such a pension will be several decades hence.

In Pingling, the township government still runs a small home for four childless old persons, who are too frail to survive by themselves. Owing to financial difficulties, however, the home is only able to provide the very basics. At the present stage, the old people's home does not seem to be a preferred option for old-age support and care in the study area. Few focus-group participants believed that life in the home is enjoyable. Old people ended up there simply because they have no other options. They were in fact pitied by others, because living in homes is often viewed as a life failure of a person or a shame to the family. On the other hand, township officials had no plans to expand the home in the near future. As a young woman put it, the childless elderly are so few nowadays that officials do not bother to think about maintaining the home any longer.

6.5. Summary remarks

The old-age security-fertility hypothesis has been widely used to explain the existing high fertility in most developing countries. Findings from numerous local and cross-national studies also prove that, to minimise the risks and uncertainties in a underdeveloped market economy, parents tend to rely on a large number of children as 'insurance' for old-age support. In rural China, *yang er fang lao* (rearing children for old age) remains a popular ideal, because most institutional conditions that favour children as sources of support still exist. Children's obligation is further strengthened by the traditional values such as ancestor worship and filial piety. Family support for the elderly is vigorously encouraged by the government through a series of legislative and administrative measures.

Since the late 1970s, the Chinese government has launched nationwide birth control campaigns in an attempt to curtail population growth, including the controversial One-Child policy. The policy formulation is largely based on calculations about the relation between macro-demographic and macro-economic growth, with little consideration of the possible micro-social effects on families and individuals. Moreover, coercive measures were usually employed in policy enforcement, before any substantial

changes took place in institutional conditions. It seems that the two government policies, birth control and family support, contradict each other.

In theory, old-age security with fewer children, if not just one child, has been proved feasible in the situation of falling mortality and rising life expectancy. It is found in the study area that, under the joint influence of development and programmatic efforts, people's fertility preferences have begun to change. Although such changes have little value for testing the old-age security-fertility hypothesis, their policy implications can not be underestimated. From the household survey results in the study area, it is evident that the small family norm in terms of ideal number of persons in a household has been widely accepted by villagers, particularly among people who are young, better educated and currently living in small households. If present ideals are going to be translated into future behaviour, it can be predicted that the nuclearisation of Chinese families will continue, and the changing family-size norms will bring fertility further down to a level much closer to government targets.

In terms of family structure, however, it is found that coresidence in a multi-generation household is the most popular choice. Very few people preferred independent living in a single-generation household. The contradiction between the ideal number of persons and the ideal number of generations in a family household surprisingly mirrors the inconsistency of government policies between birth control and family support. To take advantage of the popular acceptance of small family norms and approval of multi-generation households at the grassroots level, the government is trying to reconcile the inconsistency by encouraging young couples to have fewer children but still coreside with elderly parents.

Coresidence between parents and married children found high approval rates among respondents, across the full spectrum of socio-demographic groups. The most common reason respondents gave for favouring coresidence is inter-generational support and care, followed by family traditions. The elderly expected from family members not

only economic and material support, but more importantly also physical care and emotional relief, particularly in sickness and disability. Obviously, coresidence as the major form of family support should be encouraged continuously in future.

The present-day elderly and working-age adults belong to two unique generations in China's modern history. The former have fewer personal assets but more children for providing old-age support. The latter, by contrast, have fewer children but more opportunities to obtain their own old-age security. For economic support, over half of the younger respondents followed the traditional pattern and expected children to be their main providers in old age. Nevertheless, such expectations did not lead to a noticeable preference for large families. Because of increased policy pressure and rising economic burdens, most couples believed that two children are enough, providing one is a son. As a trade-off for quantity, parents now put special emphasis on the education of children. The policy implications for family planning programs are obvious: the One-Child target is not applicable in rural areas and should be replaced by a more practical One-Son or Two-Children policy, allowing for certain spacing requirements. In the meantime, a sizeable proportion of respondents wanted an increasing contribution from the community in providing necessary assistance to families to cope with the risks and uncertainties of family farming and a market economy. Still, as many as one-fifth of the respondents believed that they could arrange their old-age security with own efforts. Very few people participated in the insurance programs designed by the government to serve rural residents. It takes time for such programs to be trusted by their target clients.

CHAPTER 7

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

7.1. Summary of major findings

Population ageing is a world phenomenon. Much of the interest in the consequences of population ageing focuses on the security and support for the elderly as individuals and as a generation. In China, as in most developing countries, the family remains the principal provider of old-age support and care. This study aims at examining on a community basis the status and well-being of the elderly, the familial support system for the elderly, and the old-age security strategies of rural people in response to the two major government policies in rural areas: birth control and family support for the elderly, in the context of a functional return to family farming. Although it is unrealistic to expect a community study to permit conclusions about rural China as a whole, it certainly can provide rich insights into the topic under investigation.

In order to attain the proposed objects within limited time and financial budget, this study employed an integrated approach, the so-called micro-demographic community-study approach that combines a formal, structured survey operation with a number of intensive quantitative techniques. A household survey was conducted to cover a larger area in Pingling Township, in order to identify general patterns and trends. Observation, personal interviews and focus-group discussions were primarily used to inquire about attitudes, opinions and behaviour. Data collected by different techniques are mutually complementary and display a high degree of consistency. The experience from this study suggests that this combination is practical and cost-effective for similar studies of social and family change in community settings.

This study was conducted in Pingling Township and Nanshangzhao Village, a rural community in central Shaanxi, China. Like other places in China, the study area has witnessed tremendous changes over the last few decades, from the initial private land

ownership after the Land Reform to the collectivisation under the commune system and further to the return to family farming under the household responsibility system. The local economy is now experiencing a gradual transformation from a largely self-sufficient to a diversified commodity economy. Although agriculture was still the dominant sector, non-agricultural sectors were playing an important role in absorbing surplus labour and generating income. Even in agricultural production, machinery and modern technology have become increasingly popular. However, unlike most other developing countries on a similar modernisation course, socio-economic changes in China are usually sudden and drastic, resulting primarily from the government's direct intervention based on ideological concepts or macro socio-economic rationales. With little power of decision-making under the current political system, villagers have been subject to various social engineering experiments that are not necessarily always in their interest, such as the unpopular One-Child policy.

The social status and economic well-being of the aged population reflect to a certain extent the current situation of old-age security and support in rural China. In the study area, the present elderly generation are a unique group in the population because of the drastic socio-economic changes they have experienced over the last few decades: they suffered from poverty, war and famine and were deprived of education in their youth before 1949, they had limited opportunities to amass sizeable assets at their prime ages during the commune era, and now when the economy has been liberalised under the household responsibility system for making profits and getting rich, they are too old to take advantage of the new rules.

It is evident that the living standard of the elderly in the study area has greatly improved since the reform. However, this does not necessarily mean that old people enjoyed the same level of well-being and quality of life as younger generations. Old people were more likely to live in households of lower income, in poor housing conditions, and with no TV sets. What is worth noting is that old people were generally content with their present life. On the other hand, modernisation and the government's campaigns against

'feudalist and superstitious' practices have greatly eroded the power and influence of old people at home and in the community. In the study area, only a small number of old people still played an active role in the family, as household heads or major decision-makers. As an important indicator of status and power at home, elderly parents have lost their monopoly in arranging marriages for their children. This basically agrees with the modernisation theory that as the society becomes more modernised, the importance of old people is reduced. With inadequate economic security and declining status, the present-day elderly are likely to rely on children for support.

In the study area, as in other places in rural China, old-age support used to be provided by the family. Despite rapid and substantial socio-economic changes over recent decades, the family system of support appears still to be largely intact. This is evidenced by both the high levels of coresidence of elderly parents with adult children and the relatively common receipt of material support from children living separately. The present-day elderly have on average a large number of children as potential providers. Over three-quarters of old people were supported by adult children, primarily by sons. The elderly not only received support from others but also made continuous contributions to the household economy. Still, a sizeable proportion of old persons relied on their own resources, or were partly assisted by children, for living expenses. Over two-thirds of non-resident children reported regular economic transfers to their parents. In general, the level of economic support the elderly received was not high, with the majority falling in the low-expenditure category of 50 *Yuan* or less per month. However, absolute poverty is not a major issue because old persons have land plots allocated under their names. The community also provides limited relief funds in cases of crisis.

In the study area, the level of economic support the elderly received was not necessarily closely related to the number and sex of children they have or children's financial capacity. Rather, it was influenced primarily by the willingness of children to provide support. Inadequate support was often caused by domestic disputes between parents and children or among siblings. To offset the fading willingness of children to

provide for elderly parents, the government resorts increasingly to legal and administrative measures to back up the family support system.

The old-age security-fertility hypothesis has been widely used to explain the existing high fertility in developing countries. In rural China, *yang er fang lao* (rearing children for old age) remains a popular ideal, because most institutional conditions that favour children as sources of support still exist. Under the joint influence of modernisation and programmatic efforts, people's fertility preferences have begun to change. It is evident that the small-family norm has been widely accepted in the study area, particularly by people who were young, better educated and currently living in nuclear households. In terms of family structure, however, coresidence in a multi-generation household is the most popular choice. Very few people preferred independent living in a single-generation household. The inconsistency between the ideal number of persons and the ideal number of generations in a family household surprisingly mirrors the inconsistency of government policies between birth control and family support.

Coresidence between parents and married children found high approval rates among respondents, across the full spectrum of socio-demographic groups. The most common reason respondents gave for favouring coresidence is inter-generational support and care, followed by family traditions. The elderly expected from family members not only economic and material support, but more importantly also physical care and emotional relief, particularly in sickness and disability.

The present-day elderly and working-age adults belong to two unique generations. The former have fewer personal assets but more children for providing support. The latter, by contrast, have fewer children but more opportunities to obtain their own old-age security in a market-oriented economy. For economic support, over half of the younger respondents followed the traditional pattern and expected children to be their main providers in old age. Nevertheless, such expectations did not lead to a noticeable preference for large families. Because of increased policy pressure and rising economic

burdens, most couples believed that two children are enough, providing that one is a son. As a trade-off for quantity, parents now put special emphasis on the education of children. In the meantime, a sizeable proportion of respondents wanted an increasing contribution from the community in assisting families to cope with the risks and uncertainties of family farming and market economy. Still, as many as one-fifth of the respondents believed that they could arrange their old-age security with own efforts. At the present stage, very few people participated in the insurance programs designed by the government to serve rural residents. It takes time for such programs to be trusted by their target clients.

7.2. Conclusions and discussions

The family plays the central role in the support of older people throughout the world. In most developing countries, family members and a network of relatives remain virtually the only source of support on whom rural people can rely in their old age. In recent years, much of the interest in old-age security focuses on the question whether the current family support system will endure in the face of fertility decline, population ageing, and other socio-economic changes associated with modernisation. Some researchers assume that rural conditions in developing countries will eventually improve to the extent that older people are able to achieve financial independence through either their higher earning power in recent times or the widening coverage of pension and insurance programs (Petri, 1982; Jones, 1993). Others believe, however, that for the foreseeable future the traditional system of family support is likely to remain the more efficient method in rural areas of developing countries. Considerable caution must be exercised in any attempt to impose expensive and individualistic programs from Western societies (Nugent, 1990). Governments are recommended to adopt an integrated approach towards old-age support, in which family support is supplemented by public services (UN, 1994).

In China the issue of family support for the elderly is of particular concern because of several factors: the unprecedented pace of population ageing, the sheer multitude of the aged, the low level of development, the radical transformation of social and economic

structures since the late 1970s, the lack of a universal social security system, and the government birth control commitment. In fact, the government requires that the support of the elderly in rural areas be shouldered chiefly by their families and supplemented by community assistance, when a unified social security system is deemed financially unfeasible and administratively unmanageable at the current stage of development (Ministry of Civil Affairs, 1995). The government policy is based largely on two considerations. First, a strengthened family support system is essential for maintaining the general well-being of the elderly, and, hence, the social stability in rural areas. Second, given the evident old-age support motives of high fertility, a strengthened family support system is also crucial to the success of family planning programs.

Generally speaking, the demographic and socio-economic consequences of modernisation are inevitable. Once the policy is announced, the remaining question is: how to guarantee the family support system continue to function effectively without putting the elderly's welfare in jeopardy. As discussed in Chapter 1, Hashimoto and Kendig (1992) have identified four main factors at macro level that can influence family support for the elderly: demographic, economic, political and cultural. Understandably, the influence is exerted in different ways. The four factors are discussed here in such an order to reflect their respective relevance to future family support in rural China.

7.2.1. Demographic factors

Undoubtedly, demographic factors, such as fertility, mortality and naptiality, set limits for the potential availability of family support. However, unlike many of the other forces that are apt to affect family support, changes in kin availability can be predicted with relative certainty based on the current population age and sex structure. Being the most populous country in the world, China experienced unprecedentedly rapid population growth during the 1950s and 1960s, often referred to as the baby boom period. Fertility has only started to fall in recent years, primarily owing to the intervention of government birth control programs. As projections in Chapter 1 show, with sustained fertility decline

and extended life expectancy, China will have an enormous aged population in the decades to come. For example, when the baby boomers begin to enter old age in 2030, 15 per cent of the total population of 1,500 million will be classified as aged (Table 1.1). Future generations of adults of working age are going to face an unprecedentedly heavy burden of old-age dependency.

In the family support system, kin availability directly influences the well-being of the elderly. Based on the 1990 census data, a number of projections on kinship and family formation in China have been made with microsimulation models in recent years (Yang, 1992; Lin, 1995). Results show that owing to population momentum, although the dependency rate will increase at the macro-level, a crisis in the family support system at the micro-level is not going to occur in the near future. If fertility remains slightly above replacement level according to rural people's family-size preference, the potential demographic capacity of the support system still looks promising. For example, the average number of children available to people aged 65-69 will decrease only moderately from 3.6 in 1990 to 2.4 in 2030. The probability of having at least a surviving son is relatively high, around one son for each older person. The number of childless elderly is extremely small, even not taking into account the adoption factor. More interestingly, the probability is also high for the elderly to have one surviving spouse or a surviving sibling. In fact, most old people at that time will have more surviving siblings than children. This future pattern of kin availability may lead to a shift in the family system from the support provided primarily by children to that provided jointly by spouse, children and siblings.

As found in this study, people's fertility preferences have begun to change in the study area, under the combined influence of modernisation and programmatic efforts. The small family norm has been widely accepted. If present ideals are going to be translated into future behaviour, it can be predicted that the nuclearisation of Chinese families will continue, and the changing family-size norms will bring fertility further down to a level much closer to government targets. In terms of family support, perhaps villagers also realise that, because of declining mortality, fewer children are necessary to provide

support for them in old age. That is why the old-age security motive has fallen to a secondary position in people's fertility desires. On the other hand, the predominant preference for two-child families indicates that the government birth control program has reached its limit. Rural couples will try to achieve their desired family size, no matter what happens. The current coercive measures used by local officials to enforce the One-Child targets, such as heavy fines and shock campaigns, appear to be unpopular and ineffective. They only serve to damage the relations between the government and the masses at grassroots level. Findings from this study have obvious policy implications: instead of imposing the unrealistic One-Child targets in rural areas, the government should make necessary modifications to formally allow villagers to have two children, or at least one son, with certain spacing requirements. The *de facto* policies currently applied in some villages are simply not reliable enough. As projections show, the resulting fertility would not be high, only slightly higher than the replacement level. In this way, not only could the government goal of reduced fertility be met, rural people's desires for children as manpower in farming, potential supporters in old age, and successors in the family line could be satisfied.

7.2.2. Traditions and social norms

Nugent (1990) observed that in many parts of the world the co-operative solution of infrafamilial, intergenerational transfers and mutual support has been reinforced by the creation of a social norm: parents should invest in their children and the children should take care of their elderly parents. Once co-operative behaviour becomes accepted as the right thing to do, the norms may become self-enforcing. As discussed previously, in rural China Confucian values of filial piety and ancestor worship used to have a strong influence. For children to support their parents in old age was seen as a sacred duty. It is not surprising that such traditional norms and values are by no means safe from undermining by various factors associated with modernisation. Nevertheless, it is widely agreed that the cultural underpinning of the family support systems can show a degree of durability in the face of socio-economic change.

This study finds that the tradition of familial support for the elderly has remained largely unchanged in the study area. Support was provided mainly in the form of coresidence, but material and non-material assistance was also offered by children living in separate residence. More importantly, three-generation stem households in general, and coresidence in particular, were still considered as ideal living arrangements by a great majority of villagers. Top consideration was given to intergenerational support and care. In the study area, three practical factors are likely to increase the probability of the future old people living with at least one adult child. First, the future elderly will be better established financially than their parent generation, thanks to the recent reforms that make assets accumulation possible. For example, most of them have already had their own houses built. The younger generation will in fact benefit more or longer than the older generation from coresidence. Second, the future providers, or the present-day children, will be more aware of their obligations because they have fewer siblings sharing the responsibility to repay parental investment. Third, there will be little chance for a newly wedded couple to apply for a site to build their own house, and, hence, live separately, since all community land has already been divided up.

For the government to promote family support for the elderly in rural areas, the widespread approval of coresidence and co-operation within extended families at the grassroots level is obviously worth encouraging and fostering. As discussed in Chapter 5, inadequate support is more likely to be found in the elderly living alone, and caused by weakened willingness of adult children to deliver, rather than real financial difficulties. Therefore, special consideration should be given to encourage and facilitate coresidence of the elderly with their families. Policies to boost children's moral responsibility, such as the massive education campaigns and legislated requirements, are still necessary. Additional measures may include: (1) to reconfirm the elderly's personal entitlement to contracted land plots; (2) to encourage the elderly to retain their household headship as long as is possible and practical; (3) to enforce the disinheritance provisions of the Inheritance Law

to sanction any unfilial children; and (4) to revitalise to some extent the traditional role and influence of clan elders in the community.

7.2.3. The socio-economic development

In previous chapters, there was much have discussion of the influence of modernisation on the status of the elderly and the family support system. In the study area, thanks to the recent socio-economic development and structural reform, the elderly have experienced marked improvement in economic well-being. However, such changes are not substantial enough to diminish the importance of the family in providing old-age support. Some of the institutional conditions, identified by Nugent (1985), that make family support indispensable still function in the study area, such as underdeveloped capital markets, the absence or inefficiency of private or public old-age and disability insurance programs, and underdeveloped markets for the goods and services that elderly people consume. Needless to say, there are also risks and uncertainties resulting from natural causes such as disasters or crop failures, and personal reasons like illness or injury. In fact, there is going to be a lengthy time lag before the traditional family system can give way to a modern system of old-age support.

The newly introduced market-oriented reform has mixed implications to rural families' welfare. There is no doubt that the return to family farming in the study area since the early 1980s has greatly boosted agricultural production. The diversification of the local economy has also raised family incomes to an unprecedented level. Unfortunately, however, the market economy, especially an underdeveloped market economy, also brings with it fluctuations and uncertainties with which individual families have difficulty in coping. The government may increase the family's capacity to withstand possible market failures from two directions. On the one hand, the government bears the major responsibility to improve market conditions at the macro-level, such as a stable and fair market environment, better infrastructure, and extensive service networks. At the micro-level, each family will do its best to increase production and income, in order to

achieve not only a higher living standard at the moment, but also a solid foundation for old-age security in future. On the other hand, the government should assist in the development of community-based welfare programs. Some of these programs, such as the Five-Guarantees system and the co-operative health care system, were proved successful during the commune period. Owing to fund shortages, most of these programs were privatised or stopped after the reform. As shown in this study, the expectation for the government to expand community-based welfare programs was high among villagers.

In family support, the co-operative health care system is of special significance, because the demand of old people for health care is usually high, and families with sick or disabled elderly dependants are more likely to fall into financial crisis. According to a national survey in the early 1990s, 18 per cent of the rural population could not receive medical treatment, and 56 per cent of those requiring hospitalisation could not afford it (Tian, 1991). In the study area, village clinics have all been contracted out to local doctors in recent years. Villagers often complained about the declining quality of health care and rising costs. So far, the government is yet to work out a national strategy for the future development of health care in rural areas.

Additional attention should be paid to the development of education in rural areas. As found in this study, young couples in the study area have shown high aspirations in the education of their children, particularly sons. This can be interpreted as a trade-off of the number of children for the 'quality' of children under the tough government birth control policy, although old-age security may not be the only motive. If other conditions remain the same, a better educated person is preferred for family support for at least two reasons. First, he is likely to earn a better livelihood as a skilful manager of the household economy or a wage earner in formal sectors, resulting in greater means to fulfil his obligations. Second, he is less likely to shirk his support responsibility, being better informed about relevant policies and laws or more mindful of personal and family reputations. Nevertheless, a too high aspiration is still unrealistic in the situation where only four per cent of young people of college age can expect to be enrolled in a higher education

institution. The majority of rural youth have to remain on the farm anyway. Therefore, the curriculum of rural schools should be tailored to meet the actual need of villagers in developing the household economy and generating income.

7.2.4. Government policies

As Cowgill (1986) pointed out, government policies will also influence the redistribution of resources between families and the state in providing old-age support. As discussed in previous chapters, since the founding of the People's Republic in 1949, the government has imposed numerous social engineering programs according to the state socialist doctrine. However, in the welfare areas, the Marxist ideals have not been followed seriously. In urban areas, an old-age pension scheme was introduced in the early 1950s, but it covers only government employees and workers in the state-owned enterprises. In rural areas where 80 per cent of the total population live, such a program is still non-existent. Economic and material support for the elderly has always been shouldered by the family. Financial assistance to the destitute elderly from the state and the community is extremely limited, usually in the form of disaster relief or the Five-Guarantees benefits.

Since the late 1970s, the government has adopted a series of market-oriented reform policies that have greatly transformed China's social and economic structures. Most state socialist policies were abandoned. In fact, the doctrine itself is under critical scrutiny; as the late paramount leader Deng Xiaoping admitted: 'We haven't even figured out what is socialism, and what is Marxism! All is being probed' (Li, 1998). The question is: with what to replace the previous policies? There is no straightforward answer at this moment, vividly reflected in a popular saying: *mo zhe shitou guohe* (crossing river by groping for stones on the riverbed). That means, the current reform, officially the socialism with Chinese characteristics, is likely to be yet another massive social engineering experiment, only without distinctive ideological flavour.

It is widely agreed that the market-oriented reform has in recent years played a decisive role in promoting economic growth and raising people's living standards in China. However, the reform also brings with it unwanted side-effects, such as enlarged regional disparity, expanding inequity and polarisation, rampant corruption, rising unemployment, widespread social instability and disorder, and deteriorating moral standards. On the one hand, the world in which people live becomes increasingly unpredictable because of the volatile market conditions and ambiguous government policies. On the other hand, the old safety net, however limited, is gradually falling apart. Even urban residents nowadays have to face mounting uncertainties caused by the destruction of the existing welfare system. The potential social crisis is so grave that some scholars have even suggested a thorough re-examination of the development strategy China has followed so far. In her 1998 best-seller 'The Pitfall of China', He (1998) argued that the government's legitimacy claim is based so far on promoting economic growth. Now, attention should be paid to the safeguarding of social justice and equity.

Over the last 100 years, the social security system has been proved by the experience of industrialised countries to be an effective 'safety valve' and 'social stabiliser' in the market economy. A mature economic system can only function smoothly with the support of a sound social security system. In recent years, scholars have completed a great number of feasibility studies and proposed a variety of policy recommendations for the development of a modern social security system in China. Although pilot projects have been launched in a few individual areas, the government is yet to work out an overall strategy. Certainly, there are mountains of practical difficulties in such a large country at such an uncertain time. However, the key issue is lack of a clear and firm government commitment. From a long-term viewpoint, such delay and indecision will entail serious political, economic and social consequences.

The rural population has long been disadvantaged in China's development program. In fact, the capital accumulation of the country's industrialisation over the last few decades was made possible largely through the exploitation of farmers. Over the last

two decades, the improvement in people's living standard is achieved primarily through their own hard work, not at the government's mercy. At present stage, China is still ruled by a one-party authoritarian government. The official stand is that the ruling Communist Party is politically representing all the segments of the population. The fact is that, however, rural population in general, and the rural elderly in particular, have little influence in the process of policy-making, because their rights and interests are not properly, let alone proportionately, represented in the current political system. As a result, rural people's welfare still ranks low on the government's working agenda, and government outlay for developing and assisting rural welfare programs is limited.

Obviously, it is unrealistic under the current circumstance to call for a major and immediate overhaul of the existing political establishment, so that people of every interest group in the society can have their voice heard at the top decision-making level. Democratisation remains a long-term goal of China's political reform. Nevertheless, recent pilot projects of village election and self-government have already made encouraging progress at the lowest grass-root level (Kelliher, 1997). The policy of village self-government signals a significant shift in the existing policy by allowing villagers to freely elect their own government and granting the village government a defined sphere of autonomous activities. There is an urgent need for the Government to institutionalise and consolidate this new system, and extend it gradually to the township and county level. Rural people will therefore have a greater say in the decision-making on issues closely related to their interest and well-being. Given the rising concern about old-age security among villagers, it can be expected that social security and old-age support programs will receive due attention and funding from local self-governments.

As discussed in Chapter I, scholars do not recommend developing countries to follow the Western model and introduce a formal old-age support system under the current socio-economic circumstance. In China, it is also a government policy to ask the family and community to shoulder the major responsibility of old-age support and care. However, even though the Government has no imminent plan to introduce a formal old-

age support system in rural areas, it should make early efforts to formulate a unified strategy for the development of a social security system, for the country as a whole, and back it up by relevant legislation and laws. In rural areas, preferential policies and special funds are required to support the existing community programs, so that they can be gradually expanded and upgraded to provide a wider range of services and benefits. Hopefully in the near future a social security system with Chinese characteristics can be established hand in hand with a market economy with Chinese characteristics, as the government planned ((Ministry of Civil Affairs, 1995).

7.3. Implications for future research

In most rural areas of developing countries, family support is still very important. It provides income and assistance to parents throughout old age and also acts as a final security net for the elderly when they became unable to survive on their own. However, in the face of sustained fertility decline, rising life expectancy and changing socio-economic conditions, the future of the support system for the elderly is uncertain. There is a special need for intensive research on the nature and extent to which changes in familial support occur as well as their implications for the elderly's welfare and government intervention policies. As Knodel and Debavalya (1992) pointed out, impressionistic accounts of the elderly and their circumstances, or those based mainly on ideological and theoretical views, can be quite misleading if not verified by actual data.

Owing to budget constraints, this study was confined to a rural community in central Shaanxi, China. Although efforts were made to select a fieldwork site that represents the average situation, the findings of this study can hardly permit conclusions about rural China as a whole. For example, it is found the small-family norm has already been accepted by the majority of villagers, and the old-age security motive was not high on people's fertility desires. However, other studies found that rural people still prefer large families, particularly in poor areas (Chen and Mu, 1996). Budget permitting, it is strongly recommended that a similar study should be conducted in a broader area. In the

household survey of this study, the strength of family support was measured by the conventional indicators of the frequency of coresidence and of contact within the family. According to Goldstein and Ku (1993), such indicators are not sufficient to capture the effect of other influencing factors, such as the degree of obligation and affection bound in custom and social processes. Therefore, further classification of the relationship between family coresidence and family support is important. The nature of support received by the elderly varies from one family to another. As found in this study, while some old people were provided with only the minimum, others received cash and quality foods. Some were totally dependent while others were allowed to control resources. Therefore, a general description of the family as still the central support for the elderly reveals little about their actual situation or well-being. Future research on this topic will have to disaggregate family support into more efficacious categories. Finally, as repeatedly stressed in this thesis, the current situation of the elderly in rural China is largely shaped by previous social engineering programs imposed by an authoritarian government from above. The effect of such programs is not going to fade in the foreseeable future. It will make an interesting comparative study if data are available from other developing countries, where modernisation takes a more 'natural' course.

APPENDIX 1. Household survey questionnaire (a concise translation of the Chinese version)

A. Characteristics of coresident family members:

1. Code number;
2. Household headship or the relationship to the household head;
3. Sex: male, female;
4. Age;
5. Educational status: illiterate/semi-literate, primary, junior high, senior high, college;
6. Marital status: never married, currently married, separated, divorced, widowed;
7. Working status: adults working, adults not working, retired, student, children;
8. Number of surviving children.

B. Characteristics of non-resident immediate family members:

1. Code number;
2. Relationship to the household head: parents, children;
3. Age;
4. Marriage status;
5. Residence: same village, same township, same county, others;
6. Frequency of contact: almost daily, 1-3 times per week, 1-3 time per month, others;
7. Economic relations to the household head: providing support, receiving support, others.

C. Family characteristics:

1. Living standard: poor, average, well-to-do, wealthy;
2. Housing conditions: concrete structures, others;
3. Possession of TV sets: colour, black-white, no;
4. Major decision-maker in the household: Purchasing household durables;
5. Major decision-maker in the household: Managing household economy;
6. Support for the elderly family members: self support, self and children, mainly sons, mainly daughters, all children, others;
7. Average monthly expenditure on each elderly persons: <50 *Yuan*, 50-100 *Yuan*, >100 *Yuan*.

D. Old age security expectations:

1. Ideal number of persons in household;
2. Ideal number of generations in household;
3. Should young people still coreside with elderly parents after marriage?
4. Reasons for coresidence: family tradition, inter-generational assistance and care, family influence, minimising living cost, housing conditions, management of the household economy, others;
5. Future support source: family, self-support, shared responsibility between the family and the community, others.

APPENDIX 2. Guideline for focus-group discussions

A. The role and status of the elderly

1. What special roles the elderly are playing in family and in the village? Are there any differences between old men and old women?
2. How to describe the status of the elderly today, compared with other younger age groups?
3. Should people show respect for the elderly?
4. What is the role of the elderly in children's marriage arrangement?
5. Are the elderly happy about their current status?

B. Living arrangements of the elderly:

1. How do the elderly prefer to live nowadays?
2. If elderly parents have several children, whom do they prefer to live with? Are there any difference between old men and old women?

C. Experiences of old-age support :

1. What kind of support (economic, emotional or physical) do the elderly expect from children?
2. If children's support is expected, in what form (coresidence, monetary, materials, or labour)?
3. Do the expectations differ according to the characteristics of the children (age, sex, birth order, marital status, residence, financial conditions or personal character)?
4. Do the support received by the elderly in reality differ according to the characteristics of the elderly person (age, sex, marital status, health status or character)?
5. Are there any changes in people's living standard in recent years? Who receive better treatment at home, the elderly or young children?
6. Is the support the elderly received sufficient in general? If not, are there any solutions? And how can the solutions be reached (through mediation of village cadres, government intervention or lawsuits)? Are there old people who are neglected by their children?
7. What is the general attitude of adult children toward supporting their elderly parents? If there are any changes, what are the causal factors (socio-economic development, government policy, rising income and living standard, education and novel ideas, migration)?
8. What help do the elderly generally receive from sources other than children (relatives, neighbours, community, and government)? How does the Five-Guarantees system work in the community?

D. Economic activities of the elderly:

1. Do most elderly work in the village, in what form?
2. Do they work because they want to or because they have to?
3. Do the elderly coreside with their children contribute to the household? How and to what extent? Do old people give more than they receive?

E. Strategies for economic security in old age:

1. What is people's general idea of the future development in old-age support in rural areas? Should one prepare anything ahead of time for his own old-age security in absence of a government sponsored pension program? Have you ever given it a serious thought?
2. Should children continuously provide for their elderly parents? Or the elderly have to look after themselves? Or community and the state also have a role to play?
3. If you expect your children to provide for you in old age, is it still a good idea to have as many children as possible? Given the current family planning policy, rural couples are allowed to have only one child, or two children at most. Will this affect your old-age security in future?
4. When it comes to securing your old-age support, does the gender of your children play a special role? Is a son more reliable than a daughter?
5. Considering the family planning policy, how to ensure that a small number of children can provide sufficient support? In terms of financial security, what education and occupation do you expect your children to pursue in future?
6. If you expect your children to provide for you in old age, will you still coreside with them, or choose to live separately?
7. If you do not expect your children to provide for you in old age, what is the solution?
8. Are you interested in the old-age insurance programs provided by the local government and insurance companies?

APPENDIX 3. The Old-Age Support Contract

(Authorised by the District Committee on Ageing, Qingdu District, Xianyang City)

Considering relevant provisions of the Constitution, the Marriage Law, the Civil Law, the Law of Succession and the Regulations Regarding Protection of the Elderly’s Legal Rights and Interests,

Considering the traditional Chinese virtues of respecting, valuing and supporting the elderly,

Considering the government policy of providing the elderly with sufficient support to meet their financial, physical and emotional needs,

Both parties of this contract have reached the following agreement on old age support through consultation, to ensure the elderly enjoying a happy and healthy life in later years:

A. Material support: (Food, clothing, other daily necessities, and medicine)

B: Emotional support: (Harmonious family relations, entertainment)

Supplementary articles:

- 1. This contract is a legally binding document that both parties must comply with till the natural termination of the support relation.
- 2. Modifications of the contract are valid only when they are made by both parties through consultation, endorsed by the supervisory agency and verified by the notary office.
- 3. There are four copies of this contract, to be kept by the supported, the supporter, the supervisory agency and the notary office, separately.

Signature:

The Supported:

The Supporter:

The Supervisory Agency: (Village/Township Association of the Elderly)

Date:

Fulfilment Record:

Verification of the Notary Office:

咸阳市秦都区
赡养老人义务书

被赡养人：_____

住 址：_____居委会_____组

咸阳市秦都区老龄委员会制

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